

# VORTEX

THE SCIENCE FICTION FANTASY

VOL.1 NO.1 MONTHLY 45p



FEATURING:  
**MOORCOCK'S "THE END OF ALL SONGS"**

and stories by  
**CHRISTCHILD, AXTELL & HOLDSTOCK**



## EDITORIAL

VORTEX has come into being for the simple reason that there is no other monthly magazine of its type. Perhaps most like VORTEX was Michael Moorcock's large format NEW WORLDS which has not been published for over seven years.

Until now, readers have had to satisfy themselves with paperback SF, which has maintained a strong conservatism; not many experimental books have appeared. Not that publishers are to blame for this state of affairs—with the economic recession we are still living through, publishers understandably wanted to stick with sure bets. And even with a straight SF novel, there is still an element of risk.

With the emergence of VORTEX, such risks become almost nonsensical, in that each issue will contain several items of fiction, only one of which will be in any way experimental.

Experimental fiction is usually labelled Speculative Fiction, which is reasonable, because not many authors attempt to experiment within the 'rules' of Fantasy or Horror or SF. Besides which, the purpose of experimenting is usually to see what happens when certain of these rules are adjusted.

We all know what straight SF, and Fantasy consists of, because we have had the paperbacks to rely upon.

What then is Speculative Fiction? Firstly, it is the hardest of all the forms of fiction to actually write. Because it explores alternatives, challenges established mores, and tends to be more philosophical than scientific, it becomes more difficult to convince the reader of the validity of the changed rules that have been used in any particular item of fiction.

In a way, Speculative Fiction is the most down to earth of all the forms of fiction that are shrouded under the umbrella of Science Fiction; because Speculative Fiction reflects the times. It is often used as a commentary on Social History.

Such fiction is the richest in possibilities.

VORTEX, then, will publish the best available in Fantasy, SF and Speculative Fiction. All this is accompanied by colour, black-and-white, meaningful, illustrative artwork, paintings and drawings, adding more to the already fine literature.

With so many types of stories that can come from under the umbrella of SF, we think you will find the fiction in VORTEX (all of which is published for the first time) stimulating and entertaining.

It is with much pleasure that VORTEX presents for the first time in Britain, Michael Moorcock's novel, 'The End Of All Songs'. Also, this is the first time that James Cawthorn's illustrations are appearing with the novel.

It only remains now, for the reader to read.

Keith Seddon *EDITOR*

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# VORTEX

A Monthly Journal of Fantasy, Science and Speculative Fiction

VOL.1 NO.1 JANUARY 1977

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Designed by Brice/Moss.

Cover illustration by Rodney Matthews.

Published and printed by Shalmead Limited. Thame, Oxon.

# FIRST ENTRY

entry point for oblivion...

by Steve Axtell



Gregson Paulus set up camp in the forest just beyond the electric fence. From here, as from everywhere else outside the perimeter, he could see not even a glimpse of the great mansion. But he knew it was there, as he knew Australia was on the other side of the world, though he had never crossed the equator.

The mansion was not named on any maps, but he knew that the maps were biased. The makers of maps did not want him to go where he shouldn't. But it was there all right. He could tell that just by the insistence of everybody else that it wasn't there. Why did they deny it so strongly, as if by their denial they would negate its existence in reality?

It was there. He knew it. He had always known it.

A little boy plays on the dirty streets with his friends, Cowboys and Indians, through the rubble of war. His widowed mother tries to watch him as she washes up, but she cannot keep her eyes on him. He moves too fast, his friends keep changing. They dash about through the streets, whooping and laughing; ghosts are for fighting and beating up. Memories last a few seconds and then are gone, pushed gladly aside by some new chase or adventure. Johnie's got a new bike, a two wheeler, with a big metal hooter, it's really smashing, his dad bought it for him, come 'n' see . . .

#### FINGERS FEED SOULS

An obscure scrawling on the wall of the boys' toilets at his secondary school. For some reason he thought of it now, as he tried to set light to the pile of twigs and leaves, a small fireplace contained by bricks, a few feet away from the brown tent hidden by trees.

#### FINGERS FEED SOULS

Not the sort of thing his teachers would have approved of, the word soul being considered sacred and not for writing on dirty toilet walls alongside other, less philosophically-inclined graffiti, like a remark relating what Jim did here on 12/Feb '51—which at least meant something real, something you could understand and imagine, laugh about or maybe get turned on by.

#### FINGERS FEED SOULS

What's the point of scrawling that, in a toilet of all places?

Paulus forgot it and smiled as the first flickers of flame began to burn.

A hot, sunny day in 1948, walking through the streets from school, home for dinner (he doesn't like the way the school

treat his rations), he spies somebody strange clambering over the rubble and immediately he forgets his dinner, the adventure has priority. As he watches, the boy disappears behind a shattered wall. Slowly he follows making sure to tread very carefully on the ruins in order not to make too much noise and disturb the spy, who right now might be getting ready to kill somebody. Perhaps, he thinks momentarily, he should have called the police. But that was soon forgotten—the policeman wouldn't believe him. Now he can hear noises . . . the spy is murdering someone . . . he peers over the wall and sees the spy and a young lady. They have no clothes on. He stands and stares for a few seconds, then runs back whence he came. His face is a mixture of shock and pleasure. There is no embarrassment.

He awoke gently, as the soft early morning sun filtered through the forest ceiling and he was aware that it was going to be a beautiful day.

He lay in his sleeping bag, which he had unzipped during the night because it had been so warm, and half smoked a cigarette, throwing half of it away because he didn't want to develop lung cancer. Although he had never had the disease himself, and did not know anybody personally who did have it, he had seen the television campaigns against smoking and he knew that lung cancer was something he'd rather not have.

Having smoked his cigarette, he pulled on a pair of jeans and crawled out of the tent. He stood up and sucked in the sweet green air of the spring, looking across at the sparkling blue lake in the distance, reflecting the great mountains which surrounded it. Reflecting them he realized, in more than just the obvious way. Not only did the lake reflect their temporary image—a beautiful image, to be sure, but only a surface impression despite that—but the lake also reflected the development and birth of the mountains, for it was the mountains which created the ice age corrie, which had later become one of the most beautiful scenic vistas in the world. The glittering stretch of water was a hangover from the mountains as they had been in the past, in a more hectic phase of their development. But now the mountains had matured and there was a mellow contradiction, the two sides of which slept dreamily beside each other, forgetting their differences, aware of the vastness of time in which their lives were measured.

One day, perhaps, the lake would outgrow the mountains or the mountains the lake. But they both knew that such a time was eons away, too many eternities for them to worry about now. They lay

back and breathed tranquility, aware of their own charm and beauty.

Sunday morning and, as on every Sunday morning a boy was in a village church, sitting beside his mother, listening to the vicar. But the boy was changing, whereas the sermons weren't. The boy was growing up, his views of life taking a more mature form which conflicted with and negated his previous ideas. But the vicar's sermons kept on saying the same thing, their form changing somewhat from week to week, but the underlying content staying static. Of course, every twenty years or so, there would be a revolution in the churches' thinking, but because this merely supplanted one form of archaic, anachronistic belief for another, the crisis continued.

The vicar was droning on about a drought and plague in one of the fortunately less well-known parts of the world. This terrible disaster, he claimed, was the way in which the Father showed us how much he loved us. Perhaps, Paulus thought, his young mind trying desperately to appropriate reality, perhaps the Almighty was punishing those pagans for turning away from Him. Yet, wasn't it so that they had been very devout until their troubles began?

Perhaps their hands were too busy finding food to pray for their souls?

He threw the haversack over the fence, looked around him guiltily, and began to climb a tree, the higher branches of which overhung the fence. Along one branch he clambered, cautiously, inexpertly, and dropped down on the other side, hurting his ankle in the landing.

Then he picked up the haversack, strapped it to his back and began to walk towards what he estimated to be the centre of the enclosed area.

The sun had sunk below the mountains and the dusk was blue and warm. The forest was full of the cacophony of birds and animals, yet at the same time it was silent, because all these things could be ignored. He took the objective world and subjectified it, glorified the sunshine, sweetened the smell of the grass, cleared the clouds from the sky. Thus, the world became his and he was aware of a unique relationship with nature, through which he was made more aware of himself. He had often meditated upon this peculiar sensation of I, me, subject and object, the only one. Awareness of place, of time and of thinking about self. No automaton, blindly reading to stimulus, but ME, I, ALIVE, UNIQUE, MYSELF, thinking, knowing, not only the outside world, nor only the subjective person, but the reconciliation and contradiction between the two. I knows that I is something

separate from nature, but I and nature get along together, though they are constantly fighting. Fighting in order that there will be no more fighting; so that I am aware of nature as self, and of self as nature.

In such a philosophical frame of mind, he rounded a corner on the path and saw it. He stopped dead in his tracks and gulped, a nervous sweat on his forehead.

The mansion was made of red brick, and it was turreted and chimneyed. There were many gothic-type windows, their frames painted black. An ornamental path which began somewhere in the depths of the forest, led past a small pond to a great oak door. Birds were on the lawn searching for worms. Yet, it was evening.

Here then, was the object of his quest which he had pursued for the last five years — which, indeed, he had been obsessed with since childhood. As a boy he had always been aware, somehow, that this place existed and that one day he would find it. And now, here he was, and his legs felt weak and nervous at the real confirmation of what he had known. He felt for a moment like turning and running back the way he had come. But Time is a one-way street and the past is gone beyond No Entry. The only way to go is forward.

He walked across the lawn towards the path and suddenly realized that the sky was brighter. This, he reasoned, was due to the absence of any vegetation above his head to block out the evening light.

Paulus reached the door after what seemed a slow eternity, and took in his hands a great knocker of solid brass. He lifted it and rapped on the door.

The door was opened a few seconds later by a beautiful girl who smiled and asked Paulus in. He frowned but entered. She shut the door and led him along a passageway, and he knew that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, with long black hair and a lovely soft jaw line. She wore a white lace gown with no other visible accessories. Her feet were bare.

She led him into a room; a vast room decorated with gold and jewels, fitted with a strange kind of transcendental haze and sunlight streaming through the windows and almost blinding him. He turned his head from the light and saw the bed, a huge four poster covered with satins and furs. And the girl was taking off her gown to lie on it, sensuous, smiling. Taking off his haversack, he lay down beside her and she kissed him. He lay still and nervous as she undid his jacket, his shirt, his trousers. He closed his eyes as she climbed on top of him.

though the sun was still shining brightly. He stretched his body, yawned, then got out of bed. The girl had gone, but she had left behind her the delicious scent of jasmine. He smiled at her memory, and looked around for his clothes. They had gone — she must have taken them with her. Then he saw, hanging up on the wall, a suit, one of the smartest he had ever seen. It was made of beige satin, with sequined collar and cuffs on the jacket. There was also a shirt of the finest cotton, and a tie. He put them on, having had a wash in the marble-onyx basin in the bathroom adjacent, and discovered that they, as well as the shoes and socks which she had also left him, were a perfect fit. He searched for a mirror, but could not find one. He thought it odd that there should not be a mirror in the bathroom, but he didn't concern himself too much. It was only when he brushed the hair from his eyes that he noticed. He hadn't realized it when he'd washed — but now that he'd seen it, he cried out in horror, holding his wrinkled old hands before him. He looked down at himself, but could tell nothing from such an examination. He ran out of the room in panic, looking for a mirror which he hoped would prove it a false alarm. It had to be.

He found a mirror at the far end of the passageway, and as he looked in it he screamed and smashed it with his clenched fists. He had seen the face of a man aged seventy.

Staggering back down the corridor nursing his bleeding hands, he fell into a rather dark room in which was a bed. The room smelled of jasmine seed, and in the gloom he could make out the white lace gown which the girl had worn. He went over to the bed and lay down across her. She rattled.

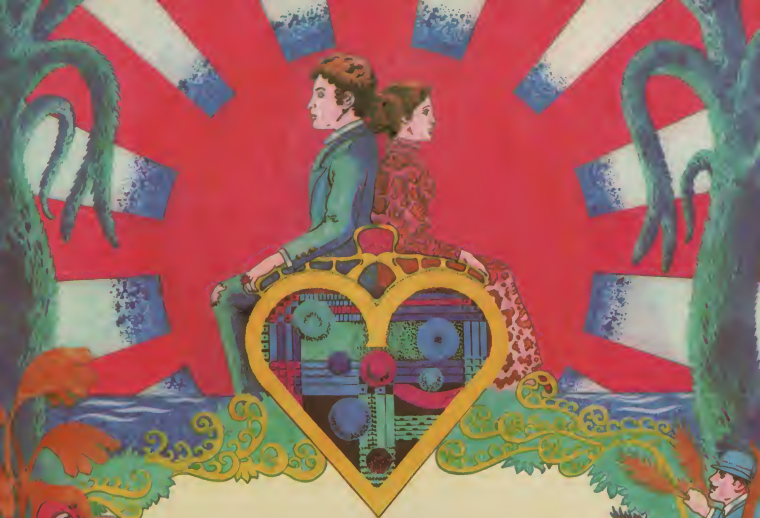
He screamed and screamed, tearing himself away from the horror and running into the passage, through a veritable wall of clinging grey cobwebs until he found a door to the outside. He opened it and staggered out into the fresh air, retching painfully, then coughing, until finally he stood up straight and began to run out into the garden. The rain had stopped, but there was now a dense mist in the air and he could not see his way for more than a few yards ahead. But he continued to run, stumbling and falling, until he reached some wooden steps leading downwards. These he took two at a time, although he could feel the pressure of his heart mounting, the pain of breathing increasing every second. Then he was at the foot of the steps and he paused awhile to recover and catch his breath.

He could hear the sound of water nearby, and guessed that he was beside the lake. He began to walk briskly in the

direction which he thought led to civilization. But then he found that his feet were getting wet, and fearing that he was walking into the lake, he turned to walk in the other direction. But there was only water that way, too. Desperate now, he turned in the direction of the steps which he had come down, but before he could reach them, the ground beneath his feet subsided, and he found himself waist deep in water. He struggled madly to reach the steps to comparative safety, but all the time he was sinking, deeper and deeper until, screaming he went under for the last time, while on the hilltop above, in the centre of the forest, a mansion began to burn.

\*  
When he awoke it was raining outside,





# Michael Moorcock

PART ONE OF

## The End of All Songs

*The fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof,  
(This is the end of every song man sings!)  
The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,  
Bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain;  
And health and hope have gone the way of love  
Into the drear oblivion of lost things.  
Ghosts go along with us until the end;  
This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.  
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait  
For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:  
This is the end of all the songs man sings.*

—Ernest Dowson *Dregs* 1899

*In Which Jherek Carnelian and  
Mrs Amelia Underwood Commune,  
to Some Degree, with Nature*

'I really do think, Mr Carnelian, that we should at least try them raw, don't you?'

Mrs Amelia Underwood, with the flat of her left hand, stroked thick auburn hair back over her ear and, with her right hand, arranged her tattered skirts about her ankles. The gesture was almost petulant; the glint in her grey eye was possibly wolfish. There was, if nothing else, something over-controlled in the manner in which she perched primly upon her block of virgin limestone and watched Jherek Carnelian as he crouched, elbows and knees pressed in the sand of a Palaeozoic beach, and sweated in the heat of the huge Silurian (or possibly Devonian) sun.

Perhaps for the thousandth time he was trying to strike two of his power rings together to make a spark to light the heap of half-dried ferns he had, in mood of ebullience long since dissipated, arranged several hours before.

'But you told me,' he murmured, 'that you could not bear to consider . . . There! Was that a spark? Or just a glint?'

'A glint,' she said, 'I think.'

'We must not despair, Mrs Underwood.' His optimism was uncharacteristically strained. Again he struck ring against ring.

Around him were scattered the worn and broken fragments of fronds which he had earlier tried to rub together at her suggestion. As power ring clacked on power ring, Mrs Underwood winced. In the silence of this Silurian (if it was Silurian) afternoon the sound had an effect upon her nerves she would not previously have credited; she had never seen herself as one of those over-sensitive women who populated the novels of Marie Corelli. She had always considered herself robust, singularly healthy. She sighed. Doubtless the boredom contributed something to her state of mind.

Jherek echoed her sigh. 'There's probably a knack to it,' he admitted. 'Where are the trilobites?' He stared absently around him at the ground.

'Most of them have crawled back into the sea, I think,' she told him coldly. 'There are two brachiopods on your coat.' She pointed.

'Aha!' Almost affectionately he plucked the molluscoidea from the dirty black cloth of his frock coat. Doubtfully, he peered into the shells.

Mrs Underwood licked her lips. 'Give them to me,' she commanded. She produced a hat-pin.

His head bowed, Pilate confronting the Pharisees, he complied.

'After all,' she told him as she poised the pin, 'we are only missing garlic and butter and we should have a meal fit for a French gourmet.' The utterance seemed to depress her. She hesitated.

'Mrs Underwood?'

'Should we say grace, I wonder?' She frowned. 'It might help. I think it's the colour . . .'

'Too beautiful,' he said eagerly. 'I follow you. Who could destroy such loveliness?'

'That greenish, purplish hue pleases you?'

'Not you?'

'Not in food, Mr Carnelian.'

'Then in what?'

'Oh . . . Vaguely. 'In-no, not even in a picture. It brings to mind the excesses of the Pre-Raphaelites. A morbid colour.'

'Ah.'

'It might explain your affinities . . . She abandoned the subject. 'If I could conquer . . .'

'A yellow one?' He tried to tempt her with a soft-shelled creature he had just discovered in his back pocket. It clung to his finger: there was the sensation of a kiss.

She dropped molluscs and hat-pin, covered her face with her hands and began to weep.

'Mrs. Underwood!' He was at a loss. He stirred the pile of fronds with his foot. 'Perhaps if I were to use a ring as a prism and direct the rays of the sun through it we could . . .'

There came a loud squeak and he wondered at first if one of the creatures were protesting. Another squeak, from behind him. Mrs Underwood removed her fingers to expose red eyes which now widened in surprise.

'Hi! I say—hi, there!'

Jherek turned. Tramping through the shallows, apparently oblivious of the water, came a man dressed in a seaman's jersey, a tweed Norfolk jacket, plus-fours, heavy woollen stockings, stout brogues. In one hand he clutched a stick of a peculiarly twisted crystalline nature. Otherwise he appeared to be a contemporary of Mrs Underwood's. He was smiling. 'I say, do you speak English of any kind?' He was bronzed. He had a full moustache and signs of a newly sprouting beard. He beamed at them. He came to a stop, resting his knuckles on his hips.

'Well?'

Mrs Underwood was confused. 'We speak English, sir. Indeed, we—at least I am are English, as you must be.'

'Beautiful day, isn't it?' The stranger nodded at the sea. 'Nice and calm. Must be the early Devonian, eh? Have you been here long?'

'Long enough, sir.'

'We are marooned,' Jherek explained. 'A malfunction of our time craft. The

paradoxes were too much for it, I suspect.'

The stranger nodded gravely. 'I've sometimes experienced similar difficulties, though happily without such drastic results. You're from the 19th century, I take it.'

'Mrs Underwood is, I hail from the End of Time.'

'Aha!' The stranger smiled. 'I have just come from there. I was fortunate enough to witness the complete disintegration of the universe—briefly, of course. I, too, am originally from the 19th century. This would be one of my regular stops if I were journeying to the past. The peculiar thing is that I was under the impression I was going forward—beyond, as it were, the End of Time. My instruments indicate as much. Yet here I am.' He scratched his sandy hair, adding, in mild disappointment, 'I was hoping for some illumination.'

'You are on your way, then, to the future?' Mrs Underwood asked. 'To the 19th century?'

'It seems that I must be. When did you leave?'

'1896,' Mrs Underwood told him.

'I am from 1894. I was not aware that anyone else had hit upon my discovery during that period . . .'

'There!' exclaimed Jherek. 'Mr Wells was right!'

'Our machine was from Mr Carnelian's period,' she said. 'Originally, I was abducted to the End of Time, under circumstances which remain mysterious. The motives of my abductor continue to be obscure, moreover. I . . . She paused apologetically. 'This is of no interest to you, of course.' She moistened her lips. 'You would not, I suppose, have the means of lighting a fire, sir?'

The stranger patted the bulging pockets of his Norfolk. 'Somewhere. Some matches. I tend to carry as many necessities as possible about my person. In the event of being stranded . . . Here we are.' He produced a large box of vests. 'I would give you the whole box, but . . .'

'A few will do. You say you are familiar with the early Devonian.'

'As familiar as one can be.'

'Your advice, then, would be welcome. The edibility of the molluscs, for instance?'

'I think you'll find the *myalina subquadrata* the least offensive, and very few are actually poisonous, though a certain amount of indigestion is bound to result. I myself am a slave to indigestion.'

'And what do these *myalina* look like?' Jherek asked.

'Oh, like mussels, really. You have to dig for them.'

Mrs Underwood took five matches from the box and handed it back.

'Your time craft, sir, is functioning properly?' Jherek said.

'Oh, yes, perfectly.'

'And you are returning to the 19th



century?"

'To 1895, I hope.'

'Then you could take us with you?'

The stranger shook his head. 'It's a single-seater. The saddle barely accommodates me, since I began to put on weight. Come, I'll show you.' He turned and began to plod through the sand in the direction from which he had come. They followed.

'Also,' added the stranger, 'it would be unwise for me to try to take people from 1896 to 1895. You would meet yourselves. Considerable confusion would result. One can tamper just a little with the Logic of Time, but I hesitate to think what would happen if one went in for such blatant paradoxes. It would seem to me that if you have been treating the Logic so cavalierly it is no wonder I do not moralise, you understand that you find yourselves in this position.'

'Then you verify the Morphail Theory,' Jherck said, trudging beside the time traveller. 'Time resists paradox, adjusting accordingly—refusing, you might say, to admit a foreign body to a period to which it is not indigenous?'

'If a paradox is likely to occur. Yes, I suspect that it is all to do with consciousness, and with our *group* understanding of what constitutes Past, Present and Future. That is, Time, as such, does not exist . . .'

Mrs Underwood uttered a soft exclamation as the stranger's craft came in sight. It consisted of an open frame of tubular lengths of brass and ebony. There was ivory here and there, as well as a touch or two of silver, copper coils set into the top of the frame, immediately above a heavily sprung leather saddle of the sort normally seen on bicycles. Before this was a small board of instruments and a brass semi-circle where a lever might normally fit. Much of the rest of the machine was of nickel and crystal, and it showed signs of wear, was much battered, dented and cracked in places. Behind the saddle was strapped a large chest, and it was to this that the stranger made at once, undoing the brass buckles and pushing back the lid. The first object he drew out of the trunk was a double-barrelled shot-gun, which he leaned against the saddle; next he removed a bale of muslin and a solar topee, and finally, using both hands, he hauled up a large wickerwork basket and dumped it in the sand at their feet.

'This might be useful to you,' he said, replacing the other objects in the trunk and securing the straps. 'It's the best I can offer, short of passage home. And I've explained why that's impossible. You wouldn't want to come face to face with yourselves in the middle of Waterloo Circus, would you?' He laughed.

'Don't you mean Piccadilly Circus,

sir?' enquired Mrs Underwood with a frown.

'Never heard of it,' said the time traveller.

'I've never heard of Waterloo Circus,' she told him. 'Are you sure you're from 1894?'

The stranger fingered the stubble on his chin. He seemed a little disturbed. 'I thought I'd merely gone full circle,' he murmured. 'Hm—perhaps this universe is not quite the same as the one I left. Is it possible that for every new time traveller a new chronology develops?' Could there be an infinite number of universes? He brightened. 'This is a fine adventure, I must say. Aren't you hungry?'

Mrs Amelia Underwood raised her beautiful brows.

The stranger pointed at the basket. 'My provisions,' he said. 'Make what use of them you like. I'll risk finding some food at my next stop—hopefully, 1895. Well, I must be on my way.'

He bowed, brandishing his quartz rod significantly. He climbed into his saddle and placed the rod in the brass groove, making some adjustments to his other controls.

Mrs Underwood was already lifting the lid of the hamper. Her face was obscured, but Jherck thought he could hear her crooning to herself.

'Good luck to you both,' said the stranger cheerfully. 'I'm sure you won't be stuck here forever. It's unlikely, isn't it? I mean, what a find for the archaeologists, ha, ha! Your bones, that is!'

There came a sharp click as the stranger moved his lever a notch or two and almost immediately the time machine began to grow indistinct. Copper glowed and crystal shimmered; something seemed to be whirling very rapidly above the stranger's head and already both man and machine were semi-transparent. Jherck was struck in the face by a sudden gust of wind which came from nowhere and then the time traveller had gone.

'Oh, look, Mr Carmelian!' cried Mrs Amelia Underwood, brandishing her trophy. 'Chicken!'



## In Which Inspector Springer Tastes the Delights of the Simple Life

For the following two days and nights a certain tension, dissipating before the advent of the time traveller but since restored, existed between the lovers (for they were lovers, only her training denied it) and they slept fitfully, the pair of them, on either side of a frond-fondled limestone rock, having to fear nothing but the inquisitive attentions of the little molluscs and trilobites, whose own lives now were free from danger, thanks to the hamper, crammed with cans and bottles enough to sustain a good-sized expedition for a month. No large beasts, no unexpected turn of the weather, threatened our Adam and our Eve; Eve, alone, knew inner conflict: Adam, simple bewildered; but then he was used to bewilderment, and sudden moods or twists of fate had been the stuff of his existence until only recently yet his spirits were not what they had been.

They rose somewhat, those spirits, at dawn this morning for the beauty, in its subtlety, excelled any creation of *fin de cosmos* artifice. A huge half-sun filled the horizon line so that the sky surrounding it shone a thousand shades of copper, while its rays, spread upon the sea, seemed individually coloured—blues, ochres, greys, pinks—until they reached the beach and merged again, as if at apex, to make the yellow sand glare rainbow white, turn the limestone to shimmering silver and make individual leaves and stems of the fronds a green that seemed near-sentient, it was so alive; and there was a human figure at the core of this vision, outlined against the pulsing semi-circle of dark scarlet, the velvet dress murky red-amber, the auburn hair a-flame, the white hands and neck reflecting the hues, delicate hint of the palest of poppies. And there was music, sonorous—it was her voice; she declaimed a favourite verse, its subject a trifle at odds with the ambience.

'Where the red worm woman waited  
for wild revenge,  
While the surf surged sullen 'neath  
moon-silver'd sky,  
Where her harsh voice, once a sweet  
voice, sang,  
Now was I,  
And did her ghost on that grey,  
cold morn,  
Did her ghost slide by?'

Rapt, Jherck straightened his back and pushed aside the frock coat which had covered him through the night; to see his love thus, in a setting to match the

perfection of her beauty, sent all other considerations helter-skelter from his head; his own eyes shone: his face shone. He waited for more, but she was silent, tossing back her locks, shaking sand from her hem, pursing those loveliest of lips.

'Well?' he said.

Slowly, through iridescence, the face looked up, from shadow into light. Her mouth was a question.

'Amelia?' He dared the name. Her lids fell.

'What is it?' she murmured.

'Did it? Was it her ghost? I await the resolution.'

The lips curved now, perhaps a touch self-consciously, but the eyes continued to study the sand which she stirred with the sharp toe of her partly unbuttoned boot. 'Wheldrake doesn't say. It's a rhetorical question ...'

'A very sober poem, is it not?'

A sense of superiority mingled with her modesty, causing the lashes to rise and fall rapidly for a moment. 'Most good poems are sober, Mr Carnelian, if they are to convey—significance. It speaks of death, of course. Wheldrake wrote much of death—and died, himself, prematurely. My cousin gave me the *Posthumous Poems* for my twentieth birthday. Shortly afterwards, she was taken from us, also by consumption.'

'Is all good literature, then, about death?'

'Serious literature.'

'Death is serious?'

'It is final, at any rate.' But she shocked herself, judging this cynical, and recovered with: 'Although, really, it is only the beginning—of our real life, our eternal life ...'

She turned to regard the sun, already higher and less splendid.

'You mean, at the End of Time? In our own little home?'

'Never mind.' She faltered, speaking in a higher, less natural tone. 'It is my punishment, I suppose, to be denied, in my final hours, the company of a fellow Christian.' But there was some insincerity to all this. The food she had consumed during the past two days had mellowed her. She had almost welcomed the simpler terrors of starvation to the more complex dangers of giving herself up to this clown, this innocent (oh, yes, and perhaps this noble, manly being, for his courage, his kindness went without question). She strove, with decreasing success, to re-create that earlier, much more suitable mood of resigned despondency.

'I interrupted you.' He leaned back against his rock. 'Forgive me. It was so delicious, to wake to the sound of your voice. Won't you go on?'

She cleared her throat and faced the sea again.

*'What will you say to me, child  
of the moon,  
When by the bright river we stand?  
When forest leaves breathe  
harmonies to the night wind's  
croon.  
Will you give me your hand, child  
of the moon?  
Will you give me your hand?'*

But her performance lacked the appropriate resonance, certainly to her own ears, and she delivered the next verse with even less conviction.

*'Will you present your pyre to me,  
spawn of the sun,  
While the sky is in full flame?  
While the day's heat the brain  
deceives, and the drugged bees  
hum.  
Will you grant me your name,  
spawn of the sun?  
Will you grant me your name?'*

Jherck blinked. 'You have lost me entirely, I fear ...' The sun was fully risen, the scene fled, though pale gold light touched sky and sea still, and the day was calm and sultry. 'Oh, what things I could create with such inspiration, if only my power rings were active. Vision upon vision, and all for you, Amelia!'

'Have you no literature at the End of Time?' she asked. 'Are your arts only visual?'

'We converse,' he said. 'You have heard us.'

'Conversation has been called an art, yet ...'

'We do not write it down,' he said, 'if that is what you mean. Why should we? Similar conversations often arise—similar observations are made afresh. Does one discover more through the act of making the marks I have seen you make? If so, perhaps I should ...'

'It will pass the time,' she said, 'if I teach you to write and read.'

'Certainly,' he agreed.

She knew the questions he had asked had been innocent, but they struck her as just criticism. She laughed. 'Oh, dear, Mr Carnelian. Oh, dear!'

He was content not to judge her mood but to share it. He laughed with her, springing up. He advanced. She awaited him. He stopped when a few steps separated them. He was serious now, and smiling.

She fingered her neck. 'There is more to literature than conversation, however. There are stories.'

'We make our own lives into stories, at the End of Time. We have the means. Would you not do the same, if you could?'

'Society demands that we do not.'

'Why so?'

'Perhaps because the stories would conflict, one with the other. There are so

many of us—there.'

'Here,' he said, 'there are but two.'

'Our tenancy in this—this Eden—is tentative. Who knows when ...?'

'Logically, if we are torn away, then we shall be borne to the End of Time, not to 1896. And what is there, waiting, but Eden, too?'

'No, I should not call it that.'

They stared, now, eye to eye. The sea whispered. It was louder than their words. He could not move, though he sought to go forward. Her stance held him off; it was the set of her chin, the slight lift of one shoulder.

'We could be alone, if we wished it.'

'There should be no choice in Eden.'

'Then here, at least ...' His look was charged, it demanded, it implored.

'And take sin with us, out of Eden?'

'No sin, if by that you mean you give your fellows pain. What of me?'

'We suffer. Both.' The sea seemed very loud, the voice faint as a wind through ferns. 'Love is cruel.'

'No!' His shout broke the silence. He laughed. 'That is nonsense! Fear is cruel! Fear alone!'

'Oh, I have so much of that!' She called out, lifting her face to the sky, and she began to laugh, even as he seized her, taking her hands in his, bending to kiss that cheek.

Tears striped her; she wiped them clear with her sleeve, and the kiss was forestalled. Instead she began to hum a tune, and she placed a hand on his shoulder, leaving her other hand in his. She dipped and led him in a step or two. 'Perhaps my fate is sealed,' she said. She smiled at him, a conspiracy of love and pain and some self-pity. 'Oh, come, Mr Carnelian, I shall teach you to dance. If this is Eden, let us enjoy it while we may!'

Brightening considerably, Jherck allowed her to lead him in the steps.

Soon he was laughing, a child in love and, for the moment, not the mature individual, the man, whose command could conquer.

Disaster (if it was disaster) delayed, they pranced, beside the Palaeozoic seaside, an improvised polka.

But it was only delayed. Both were expectant; fulfilment, consummation hovered. And Jherck sang a wordless song; within moments she would be his bride, his pride, his celebration.

The song was soon to die on his lips. They rounded a clump of flimsy vegetation, a pavement of yellow rock, and came to a sudden and astounded stop. Both glared, both felt vitality flow from them to be replaced by taut rage. Mrs Underwood, sighing, withdrew into the stiff velvet of her dress.

'We are fated,' she murmured. 'We are!'

They continued to glare at the un-

witting back of the one who had frustrated their idyll. He remained unaware of their wrath, their presence.

The shirt-sleeves and trousers rolled up to elbow and knee respectively, the bowler hat fixed firmly on the heavy head, the briar pipe between the lips, the newcomer was paddling contentedly in the amniotic ocean.

As they watched, he took a large white handkerchief from the pocket of his dark serge trousers (waistcoat and jacket, shoes and socks lay neat and incongruous on the beach behind), shook it out, tied a small knot at each corner, removed his hat and spread the handkerchief over his cropped and balding scalp. This accomplished, he began to hum—"Pom te pom, pom pom pom, te pom pom"—wading a little further through the shallow water, pausing to raise a red and goose-pimpled foot and to brush at two or three wheat-coloured trilobites which had begun to climb his leg.

'Funny little beggars,' he was heard to mutter, but did not seem to mind their curiosity.

Mrs Underwood was pale. 'How is it possible?' A vicious whisper. 'He has pursued us through Time!' With one hand, she unclenched the other. 'My respect for Scotland Yard, I suppose increases ...'

Forgetting his private disappointment in favour of his social responsibilities (he had developed proprietorial feelings towards the Palaeozoic), Jherek called:

'Good afternoon, Inspector Springer.'

Mrs Underwood reached a hand for his arm, as if to forestall him, but too late. Inspector Springer, the almost seraphic expression fading to be replaced by his more familiar stern and professional mask, turned unwillingly.

Bowler forgotten in his left hand, he removed his pipe from his lips. He peered. He blinked. He heaved a sigh, fully the equal of their own most recent sighs. Happiness fled away.

'Good 'eavens!'

'Heavens, if you prefer,' Jherek welcomed correction, for he still studied the mores of the 19th century.

'I thought it was 'eaven,' Inspector Springer's slap at an exploring trilobite was less tolerant than before. 'But now I'm beginning to doubt it. More like 'ell ...' He remembered the presence of Mrs Underwood. He stared mournfully at a wet trouser leg. 'The other place, I mean.'

There was a tinge of pleased malice in her tone: 'You think yourself dead, Inspector Springer?'

'The deduction fitted the facts, madam.'

Not without dignity, he placed the bowler on top of the knotted handkerchief. He peered into the pipe and, satisfied that it had gone out, slipped it into a pocket. Her irony was wasted; he became a trifle more confidential.

'An 'eart attack, I presumed, brought about by the stress of recent events. I was just questioning them foreigners—the little anarchists with only one eye—or three, if you look at it another way—when it seemed to me they vanished clean away.' He cleared his throat, lowered his voice a fraction. 'Well, I turned to call me sergeant, felt a bit dizzy myself, and the next thing I know, 'ere I am—in 'eaven.' He seemed then to recall his previous relationship with the pair. He straightened, resentful. 'Or so I deduced until you turned up a minute ago.' He waded forward until he stood on glinting sand. He began to roll down his trousers. He spoke crisply. 'Well then,' he demanded, 'what is the explanation? Briefly, mind. Nothing fancy.'

'It is simple enough.' Jherek was glad to explain. 'We have been hurled through Time, that is all. To a pre-Dawn Age. That is, to a period before Man existed at all. Millions of years. The Upper or—?' He turned for help to Mrs Underwood.

'Probably the Lower Devonian,' she said. She was off-hand. 'The stranger confirmed it.'

'A warp in Time,' Jherek continued. 'In which you were caught, as we were. Admitting no large paradoxes, Time ejected us from your period. Doubtless, the Lat were so ejected. It was unfortunate that you were in the proximity ...'

Inspector Springer covered his ears, heading for his boots as if towards a haven. 'Oh, Gawd! Not again. It is 'ell! It is!'

'I am beginning to share your view, inspector.' Mrs Underwood was more than cool. She turned on her heel and started to walk in the direction of the frond forest at the top of the beach. Normally her conscience would sharply rule out such obvious tricks, but she had been thwarted; she had become desperate—she gave Jherek the impression that he was to blame for Inspector Springer's arrival, as if, perhaps, by speaking of sin he had called forth Satan into Eden.

Frozen, Jherek was trapped by the manoeuvre as neatly as any Victorian beloved. 'Amelia,' was all he could pipe.

She did not, of course, reply.

Inspector Springer had reached his boots. He sat down beside them; he pulled free, from one of them, a grey woollen sock. He addressed the sock as he tried to pull it over his damp foot. 'What I can't work out,' he mused, 'is whether I'm technically still on duty or not.'

Mrs Underwood had come to the frond forest. Determinedly she disappeared into the rustling depths. Jherek made up his mind to stumble in wretched pursuit. The host in him hesitated for only a second.

'Perhaps we'll see you again, inspector?'

'Not if I—'

But the high-pitched scream interrupted both. A glance was exchanged, Inspector Springer forgot differences, obeyed instincts, leapt to his feet, hobbling after Jherek as he flung himself forward, racing for the source of the scream.

But already Mrs Amelia was flying from the forest, outrage and horror remoulding her beauty, stopping with a gasp when she saw salvation; mutely, she pointed back into the agitated foliage.

The fronds parted. A single eye glared out at them, its three pupils fixed steadily, perhaps lecherously, upon the panting form of Mrs Underwood.

'Mibix,' said a guttural, insinuating voice.

'Ferkit,' replied another.

### 3

## A Lower Devonian Tea

Swaggering, in torn and mephitic striped pyjamas, a three-foot-high humanoid with a bulbous nose, pear-shaped head, huge protuberant ears, facial whiskers, a silver dinner fork in one hand and a silver dinner knife in the other, emerged from the ferns.

Jherek, too, had once worn the pyjamas of the Nursery; had suffered the regime of that robot survivor from the Late Multitude Cultures. He recognised Captain Mubbers, leader of the Lat brigand-musicians. He had seen him twice since the Nursery—at the Café Royal and later, in custody together, at Scotland Yard.

Captain Mubbers grunted at Jherek with something like grudging neutrality, but when his three pupils focussed on Inspector Springer he uttered an unpleasant laugh.

Inspector Springer would accept no nonsense, even when five more Lat joined their leader and shared his amusement. 'In the name of Her Majesty the Queen,' he began. But he hesitated; he was off guard.

'Ood ja shag ok gongong pish?' Captain Mubbers was contemptuous. 'Klixshat efang!'

Inspector Springer was used to this sort of thing; he remained apparently impassive, saying ponderously: 'That's insulting behaviour to a police officer. You're doing yourself no good at all, my lad. The sooner you understand that

English law . . . Abruptly, he was baffled. 'This still would be England, wouldn't it?' Mrs Underwood was enlisted.

'I'm not altogether sure, inspector.' She spoke without sympathy, almost with relish. 'I haven't recognised anything.'

'It's a bit too warm for Bognor, certainly. I could be outside my jurisdiction.' Inspector Springer sensed escape. The notebook he had begun to extract from his back pocket was now returned. Beneath his disturbed moustache there appeared a strained grin. It was weak. He had lost the day to the Lat. He continued, lame. 'You think yourself lucky, my lad. If you ever set foot in the Metropolitan area again . . .'

'Hrunt!' Derisively, Captain Mubbers waved his remaining man forward. He came cautiously from the bushes, pupils a-dart for Springer's forces. And Jherek relaxed a fraction, knowing the Lat would be wary of decisive action until they were convinced the three were without allies.

Inspector Springer seemed ill at ease with his new and self-appointed diplomatic status. 'By the looks of it,' he told the Lat, 'we're all in the same boat. It's no time to be raking up old scores, lads. You can see the sense of that, surely?'

Questioningly, Captain Mubbers looked up at Jherek and Mrs Underwood. 'Kaprim ul shim mibix clom?' he asked, with a nod of his head in the policeman's direction.

Jherek shrugged. 'I'm inclined to agree with the inspector, Captain Mubbers.'

'Ferkit!' exclaimed one of the other Lat. 'Potkup mef rim chok-kum! Shag ugga?' He started forward, brandishing a fish-fork marked with the prominent 'N' of the Café Royal.

'Thurk!' commanded Captain Mubbers. He leered unctuously at Mrs Underwood; he offered her an unwholesome bow. He took a step closer, murmuring: 'Dwap ker niknur, fazy?'

'Really!' Mrs Underwood lost all her carefully restored composure. 'Mr Camelian! Inspector Springer! How can such suggestions . . . ? Oh!'

'Kroofrudi,' Captain Mubbers was unrepentant. Significantly, he patted his elbow. 'Kwoi-kwoi?' He glanced back at the front forest. 'Nizzle-uk?'

Inspector Springer's sense of decency was offended. He listed forward, one boot still in his hand. 'Law or no law . . .'

'Fwik hrunt!' spat Captain Mubbers. The others laughed, repeating the witticism to one another; but the policeman's objection had lowered the tension.

Mrs Underwood said firmly: 'They are probably hungry. We have some biscuits back at our camp. If we were to lead them there . . .'

'At once,' said Jherek, and he began to walk. She linked her arm in his, an action

which served to confuse both Jherek and Captain Mubbers.

Inspector Springer kept step with them. 'I must say, I could do with a nice Rich Tea!'

'I think I've eaten most of those,' Jherek was regretful. 'But there's a whole box of Fig Rolls.'

'Ho, ho!' Inspector Springer performed a cryptic wink. 'We'll let *them* have the Fig Rolls, eh?'

Puzzled, but temporarily passive, the Lat trailed behind.

Relishing the delicate touch of her arm against his rib, Jherek wondered if a police inspector and seven aliens could constitute the 'society' Mrs Underwood claimed as the influence upon the 'morality' and 'conscience' thwarting the full expression of his love for her. He felt, in his heart, that she would so define the group. Resignation, once more, slid into the space so recently left by anticipation.

They reached the rock and the hamper: their home. Kettle in hand, he set off for the spring they had discovered. Mrs Underwood prepared the primus.

Alone for a moment, Jherek reflected that their provisions would soon expire, with eight fresh mouths to fill. He foresaw, indeed, a dispute in which the Lat would attempt to gain possession of the food. It would mean some relief, at least. He smiled. It might even mean a War.

A little later, when the primus stove had been pumped and lit and the kettle settled on its flame, he studied the Lat. It seemed to him that their attitude towards Mrs Underwood had altered a fraction since they had first seen her in the front forest. They sat in a semi-circle on the sand, a short distance away from the rock in whose shadow the three humans crouched. Their manner, while still what she would probably have called 'insulting', was tinged with caution; perhaps awe: perhaps they were daunted by the easy way in which she had taken command of events. Could it be that she reminded them of that invulnerable old robot, Nurse? They had learned to fear Nurse. Certainly their position cross-legged, hands on knees—recalled Nurse's demands upon her charges.

The kettle began to steam. Inspector Springer, with a courtly gesture to Mrs Underwood, reached for the handle. Accepting the metal tea-pot from his hostess, he poured in the water. The Lat, like witnesses at a religious ritual (for Inspector Springer certainly conveyed this mood he the priest, Mrs Underwood the priestess), were grave and wary. Jherek himself shared some of their feelings as the ceremony advanced with formal grace.

There were three tin cups and a tin basin. These were laid out on the top of the hamper (which contained many

such comforts). A can of milk was set beside them, and a box of sugar, with a spoon.

'A minute or two to let it brew,' intoned Inspector Springer. In an aside, he told Jherek: 'It's what I've been missing most of all.'

Jherek could not guess if he meant the tea itself or the ritual involved.

From a box at her side, Mrs Underwood made a selection of biscuits, arranging them in a pattern upon a tin plate.

And at length the tea was poured. The milk was added. The sugar was added.

Inspector Springer was the first to sip. 'Ah!' The sense of occasion remained. 'That's better, eh?'

Mrs Underwood handed the large bowl to Captain Mubbers. He sniffed it, blew at it, then sucked up half the contents in a single inhalation.

'Gurp?' he enquired. 'Tea,' she told him. 'I hope it's to your taste. We have nothing stronger.'

'Tee-ee!' Captain Mubbers, quick to mime innuendo from the least promising vein, glanced sidelong (with two of his pupils) at his companions. They sniggered. 'Kroofrudi.' He held out the cup for more.

'That's for all of you to share,' she said firmly. She waved, to indicate his men. 'All of you.'

'Frit hrunt?' He seemed unwilling. She took the bowl from him and gave it to the man next to him.

'Grotchit snirt.' Captain Mubbers snorted and touched his comrade's elbow with his own. 'Nootchoo?'

The Lat was amused. The tea bubbled as he exploded with laughter.

Inspector Springer cleared his throat. Mrs Underwood averted her eyes. Jherek, feeling a need to extend some sort of friendship to the Lat, bubbled his tea and laughed with them.

'Not you, Mr Carenlian,' she said. 'You, surely, know better. Whatever else, you are not a savage.'

'They offend your morality?' 'Morality, no. Merely my sensibilities.' 'It strikes you as aesthetically.' 'Your analysis is accurate.'

She had withdrawn from him again. He swallowed the stuff down. To him, it seemed crude, in taste and texture. But he accepted her standard; to serve it, and to win her approval, was all he desired. The biscuits, one by one, were consumed.

Inspector Springer was the first to finish; he withdrew a large white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his moustache. He was thoughtful. He voiced Jherek's concern of a short while before:

'Of course,' he said, 'this grub isn't going to last forever, now, is it?'

'It will not last very long at all,' said Mrs Underwood.

## *A Fresh Quest—on the Trail of the Hamper*

'And the Lat will try to steal it,' added Jherek.

'They'll 'ave a job there,' Inspector Springer spoke with the quiet confidence of the professional protector of property. 'Being English, we're more fair-minded, and therefore we'll keep strict control of the supplies. Not, I suppose, that we can let them starve. We shall 'ave to eke 'em out learn to live off the land. Fish and stuff.'

'Fish?' Mrs Underwood was uncertain. 'Are there fish?'

'Monsters!' he told her. 'Aven't you seen 'em? Sort of sharks, though a bit smaller. Catch one o' those beggars and we could eat for a fortnight. I'll put me mind to it.' He had brightened again and seemed to be enjoying the challenges offered by the Lower Devonian. 'I think I spotted a bit o' line in the 'amper. We could try using snails for bait.'

Captain Mubbers indicated that his bowl was empty.

'Crotchnuk,' he said ingratiatingly. 'No more,' she said firmly. 'Tea-time is over, Captain Mubbers.'

'Crotchnuk mibix?'  
'All gone,' she said, as if to a child. She took the lid from the pot and showed him the sodden leaves. 'See?'

His hand was swift. It seized the pot. The other dived into the opening, scooping out the tea-leaves, cramming them into his mouth. 'Glop-pib!' he spluttered apologetically. 'Drexly glop-pib!'

Fatalistically, Mrs Underwood allowed him to complete his feast.

'But, inspector, you told us that the hamper could not be removed without bringing you instantly to wakefulness!' Mrs Amelia Underwood was within an ace of tapping her foot: there was a note to her voice which Jherek recognised.

Inspector Springer also recognised it. He blushed as he held up the wrist to which was attached a severed thong. 'I tied it to the 'amper,' he said lamely. 'They must o' cut it.'

'How long have you been asleep, inspector?' Jherek asked.

'Ardly at all. A few winks 'ere, a few there. Nothin' to speak of.'

'They were hearty winks!' She drew in a sharp breath as she stared around her in the grey pre-dawn. 'Judging by your snores. I heard them all night.'

'Oh, come now, ma'am ...'

'They could be miles away,' said Jherek. 'You should see them run, when they want to. You did not sleep well either, Mrs Underwood?'

'Only the inspector, it seems, enjoyed a satisfying rest.' She glared at the policeman. 'If you want your house burgled, tell the police you're going on holiday. That's what my brother always used to say.'

'That's 'ardly fair, ma'am ...' he began, but he knew he was on shaky ground. 'I took every precaution. But these foreigners—with their knives—' again he displayed the severed thong—'well, 'ow can you anticipate ...?'

She inspected the surrounding sand, saying mournfully, 'Look at all these footprints. Do you remember, Mr Carnelian, when we would rise in the morning and go down to the sea and there wouldn't be a mark on the beach? Not a sign of another soul! It's so spoiled now.' She was pointing. 'There's a fresh trail. Leading inland.'

Certainly, the ground was disturbed. Jherek detected the broad footprints of the departing Lat.

'They'll be carrying the 'amper,' offered Inspector Springer, 'so they'll be slowed down a bit.' He clutched his midriff. 'Ooh, I 'ate to start the day on an empty stomach.'

'That,' she said with satisfaction, 'is entirely your fault, inspector!'

She led the way forward while Jherek and Inspector Springer, tugging on their coats, did their best to keep pace with her.

Even before they had entered a large stretch of frond forest and were labouring up-hill, Mrs Underwood's quick eye detecting a broken branch or a crushed leaf as signposts to the route of the thieves, the sun had risen, splendid and

golden, and begun to beat its hottest. Inspector Springer made much use of his handkerchief on the back of his neck and his forehead, but Mrs Underwood would not let them pause.

The hill grew steeper. It was virtually sheer. Still she led; still she allowed them no rest. They panted—Jherek cheerfully and Inspector Springer with loud resentment. At two stages he was heard to breathe the word 'Women' in a desperate, incantatory fashion, and at a third he appended another word, in a voice which was entirely inaudible. Jherek, in contrast, was enjoying the exertion, the sense of adventure, though he had no belief that they could catch Captain Mubbers and his men.

She was a score of yards ahead of them, and higher. 'Nearly at the top,' she called.

Inspector Springer was not encouraged. He stopped, leaning against the stem of a fern which rose fifteen feet over his head and rustled as it took the weight of his bulky frame.

'It would be best,' Jherek said, passing him, 'if we were to remain as close together as possible. We could so easily become separated.'

'She's a bloomin' madwoman,' grunted the inspector. 'I knew it all along.' But he laboured after Jherek, even catching him up as he clambered over a fallen trunk which left a smear of green on the knees of his trousers.

Jherek sniffed. 'Your smell! I wondered—I haven't quite smelt anything like it before. It is you. Very odd. Pleasant, I suppose ...'

'Gur!' said Inspector Springer.

Jherek sniffed again, but continued to climb, now using his hands and his feet, virtually on all fours. 'Certainly pungent ...'

'Cor! You cheeky littl b—'

'Excelsior!' It was Mrs Underwood's voice, though she could no longer be seen. 'Oh, it's magnificent!'

Inspector Springer caught hold of Jherek's ankle. 'If you've any further personal comments, I'd be more than grateful if you'd keep them to yourself.'

'I'm sorry, inspector,' Jherek tried to free his foot. He frowned. 'I certainly meant no offence. It's simply that such smells—perspiration, is it?—are uncommon at the End of Time. I love it. Really.'

'Ugh!' Inspector Springer let go of Jherek's foot. 'I 'ad you marked right from the start, too. Bloomin' cream-puff. Café Royal-Oscar Wilde should 'ave trusted me own judgement ...'

'I can see them!' Mrs Underwood's voice again. 'The quarry's in sight!'

Jherek pressed past a low branch and saw her through the dappled fronds.

'Ouch!' said Inspector Springer from behind him. 'Cor! If I ever get back to





London and if I ever lay 'ands on you ...'

The belligerence seemed to give him energy, enabling him, once more, to catch up. They arrived, shoulder to shoulder, to stand at Mrs Underwood's side. She was flushed. Her eyes shone. She pointed.

They stood on the edge of a cliff that was almost sheer, its sides dotted with clumps of vegetation. Some hundreds of feet below them the cliff levelled out to a broad, stony beach, touching the wide, placid water of a creek whose brilliant blue, reflecting the sky, was in beautiful and harmonious contrast with the browns, greens and yellows of the flanking cliffs.

'It is simple,' she said, 'and it is magnificent! Look, Mr Carnelian! It goes on forever. It is the world! So much of it. All virgin. Not even a wild beast to disturb its vast serenity. Imagine what Mr Ruskin would say of all this. Switzerland cannot compare ...' She was smiling now at Jherek. 'Oh, Mr Carnelian—it is Eden. It is!'

'Hm,' said Inspector Springer. 'It's pretty enough scenery. But where's our little friends? You said—'

'There!'

Tiny figures could be seen on the beach. There was activity. They were at work.

'Making something, by the look of it,' murmured Inspector Springer. 'But what?'

'A boat, probably.' She spread an arm. 'You'll observe there is just a small area of beach—a sort of cove, really. The only way to continue is across the water. They will not turn back, for fear of our pursuit.'

'Aha!' Inspector Springer rubbed his hands together. 'So we've got 'em, ripe. We'll nab 'em before they can ever—'

'They are seven,' she reminded him. 'We are three. And one of us a woman.'

'Yes,' he said. 'That's true.' He lifted his bowler between thumb and forefinger, scratching his head with his little finger. 'But we're bigger. And we've the advantage of surprise. Surprise is often worth more than any amount of 'eavy artillery ...'

'So I gather from the *Boys' Own Paper*,' she said sourly. 'But I would give much, at this moment, for a single revolver.'

'Not allowed to carry them in the ordinary way, ma'am,' he said portentously. 'If we had received information ...'

'Oh, really, inspector?' She was exasperated. 'Mr Carnelian? Have you any suggestions?'

'We might frighten them off, Mrs Underwood, long enough for us to regain the hamper.'

'And have them chase and overwhelm us? No hamper Mubbers must be captured. With a hostage, we can hope to return to our camp and bargain with them. I had hoped to maintain civilised behaviour. However ...'

She inspected the cliff edge. 'They

descended here. We shall do the same.'

'I've never 'ad much of an 'ead for 'eights,' Inspector Springer watched dubiously as she swung herself over the edge and, clinging to tufts of foliage and outcroppings of rock, began to climb downward. Jherek, concerned for her safety, yet acknowledging her leadership, watched her carefully, then followed her. Grumbling, Inspector Springer blundered in the rear. Little showers of stones and loose earth fell on Jherek's head.

The cliff was not so steep as Jherek had imagined, and the descent became noticeably easier after the first thirty feet so that at times they could stand upright and walk.

It seemed to Jherek that the Lat had seen them, for their activity became more frenetic. They were building a large raft from the stems of the bigger ferns which grew near the water, using strips of their torn-up pyjamas to hold the rather fleshy trunks together. Jherek knew little of such matters, but it seemed to him that the raft would quickly become water-logged and sink. He wondered if the Lat could swim. Certainly, he could not.

'Ah! We are too late!' Mrs Underwood began to let herself slide down the cliff, ripping her already tattered dress in several places, careless of modesty, as she saw Captain Mubbers order their hamper placed in the middle of the raft. The six Lat, under the command of their captain, lifted the raft and began to bear it towards the brackish waters of the creek.

Jherek, anxious to remain close to her, copied her example, and was soon sliding without control after her.

'Stop!' she cried, forgetting her plans to capture Captain Mubbers. 'We wish to bargain!'

Startled, perhaps, by the wild descent, the Lat began to run with their raft until they were up to their waists in water. Captain Mubbers jumped aboard. The raft tilted. He flung himself upon the hamper, to save it. The raft swung out at an angle and the Lat began to flounder after it, pulling themselves aboard as best they could, but two were left behind. Their shrieks could be heard by the human beings, who had almost reached the bottom of the cliff.

'Ferkit!'

'Kroofrud!'

'Nukgnursh!'

Captain Mubbers and his men had left their paddles on the beach. With their hands, they tried to force the raft back towards the land.

'Quickly!' cried Mrs Underwood, a general still. 'Seize them. There are our hostages!'

The raft was now many yards from the shore, though Captain Mubbers seemed determined not to abandon his men.

Jherek and Inspector Springer waded

into the shallows and grabbed at the two Lat, who were now almost up to their necks in the waters of the creek. They splashed; they tried to kick, but were gradually herded back to where Mrs Underwood, blazing and determined, awaited them (it was evident that they were much more nervous of Mrs Underwood than of those they recognised as her minions).

'Knuxelf!' cried Captain Mubbers to his men. 'Groo hunt bookra! His voice grew fainter.

The two Lat reached the beach, dodged past Mrs Underwood and began to make for the cliff. They were in a state of panic.

'Blett mibix gurlp!' screamed one of the hysterical Lat as he fell over a stone. His comrade helped him to his feet, glaring behind him at the drifting raft. It was then that he was suddenly transfixed—all three pupils focussed on the raft. He ignored Jherek and Inspector Springer as they ran up and laid hands on him. Jherek was the first to look back.

There was something in the water besides the raft. A glittering green insect-like body, moving very rapidly.

'Gawd!' breathed Inspector Springer. 'It must be over six feet long!'

Jherek glimpsed antennae, white-grey claws, spiny and savage, a rearing, curling tail, armed with brown tusks, paddle-shaped back legs, all leaping half out of the thick waters, attacking the raft.

There were two loud snapping noises, close together, and the front claws had each grasped a Lat. They struggled and screamed. The tusky tail swung up and round, clubbing them unconscious. Then the gigantic scorpion (for it resembled nothing else) had returned to the depths, leaving debris behind—a bobbing basket-work hamper, green pulpy logs to which the surviving Lat clung.

Jherek saw a trail in the distant water, near the middle of the creek. He knew that this must be another such beast; he waded forward, offering his arms to the desperate Lat and shouting: 'Oh, what a jolly adventure, after all! The Duke of Queens could not have arranged a more sensational display! Just think, Mrs Underwood—none of this was engineered. It is all happening spontaneously—quite naturally. The scorpions! Aren't they superbly sinister, sweet sister of the sphynx?'

'Mr Carnelian!' Her voice was more than urgent. 'Save yourself. More of the creatures come from all sides!'

It was true. The surrounding water was thick with gigantic scorpions. They converged.

Jherek drew Captain Mubbers and another Lat back to the shore. But a third was too slow. He had time to cry one last 'Ferkit!' before the claws contracted and the great tail thumped and he



## *At the Time Centre*

became a subject of contention between the scorpion who had caught him and those of the scorpion's comrades who were disappointed at their own lack of success.

Mrs Underwood reached his side. There was alarm and disapproval on her features. 'Mr Carnelian—you frightened me so. But your bravery ...'

He raised both eyebrows.

'It was superb,' she said. Her voice had softened, but only momentarily. She remembered the hamper. It was the only thing left afloat, and apparently was without interest for the scorpions, who continued to dispute the ownership of the rapidly disintegrating corpse which occasionally emerged above the surface of the creek. There was foam, and there was blood.

The hamper bobbed up and down in the eddy created by the warring water scorpions; it had almost reached the middle of the creek.

'We must follow its drift,' she said, 'and hope to catch up with it later. Is there a current? Inward or outward? Where is the sea?'

'We must watch,' said Jherek. 'With luck, we can plot its general course, at least.'

Something fishy appeared above the surface near the hamper. A brown, glistening back, with fins, slid from view almost immediately.

'The sharks,' said Inspector Springer. 'I told you about them.'

The hamper which made this world a true Eden rose under the back of at least one large finny creature. It turned over.

'Oh!' cried Mrs Underwood.

They saw the hamper sink. They saw it rise again. The lid had swung open, but still it bobbed.

Quickly suddenly, Mrs Underwood sat down on the shingle and began to cry. To Jherek, the sound diminished all those which still issued from that savage Lower Devonian creek. He went to her. He seated himself beside her and he put a slim arm around her lovely shoulders.

It was then that a small power boat, its motor whining, rounded the headland. It contained two black-clad figures, one seated at the wheel, the other standing up with a boathook in its hands. The craft made purposefully for the hamper.

Mrs Underwood stopped crying and began to blink.

'It's getting to be like bloomin' Brighton,' said Inspector Springer disapprovingly. 'It seemed so unspoiled at first. What a racket that boat makes!'

'They have saved the hamper,' said she. The two figures were hauling it aboard. The boat was rocked by the squirming movements of the large fish. A few objects fell from the hamper. The two figures seemed abnormally anxious to recover the objects, taking great trouble to pursue and scoop up a tin mug which had gone adrift. This done, the boat headed in their direction.

Jherek had seen nothing quite like the costumes of the newcomers; though they bore some resemblance to certain kinds of garments sometimes worn by space travellers; they were all of a piece, shining and black, pouched and quilted, belted with broad bands containing what were probably tools. They had tight-fitting helmets of the same material, with goggles and ear-pieces, and there were black gauntlets on their hands.

'I don't like the look of 'em,' muttered the inspector. 'Divers, ain't they?' He glanced back at the hills. 'They could be up to no good. Why 'aven't they showed themselves before?'

'Perhaps they didn't know we were here,' said Jherek reasonably.

'They're showing an uncommon interest in our 'amper. Could be the last we'll see of it.'

'They are almost upon us,' said Mrs Underwood quietly. 'Let us not judge them, or their motives, until we have spoken. Let us hope they have some English, or at worst French.'

The boat's bottom crunched on the shingle; the engine was cut off; the two passengers disembarked, pulling the little vessel clear of the water, removing the hamper and carrying it between them to where Mrs Underwood, Jherek Carnelian, Inspector Springer, Captain Mubbers and the three surviving Lat awaited them. Jherek noted that they were male and female, but of about the same height. Little of their faces could be seen above the high collars and below the goggles. When they were a couple of yards away they stopped and lowered the hamper. The female pushed back her goggles, revealing a heart-shaped face, large blue-grey eyes, as steady as Mrs Underwood's, and a full mouth.

It was unsurprising that Mrs Underwood took her for French.

'Je vous remercie bien ...' she began.

'Aha!' said the woman, without irony. 'You are English, then.'

'Some of us are,' said Inspector Springer heavily. 'These little ones are Latvians.'

'I am Mrs Persson. May I introduce Captain Bastable.' The man saluted; he raised his own goggles. His face was tanned and handsome; his blue eyes were pale.

'I am Mrs Underwood. This is Mr Carnelian, Inspector Springer, Captain Mubbers—I'm afraid I've no idea of the other names. They do not speak English. I believe they are space travellers from the distant future. Are they not, Mr Carnelian?'

'The Lat,' he said. 'We were never entirely clear about their origins. But they did come in a space-ship. To the End of Time.'

'You are from the End of Time, sir?' Captain Bastable spoke in the light, clipped tones familiar to Jherek as being from the 19th century.

'I am.'

'Jherek Carnelian, of course,' said Mrs Persson. 'A friend of the Duke of Queens, are you not? And Lord Jagged?'

'You know them?' He was delighted.

'I know Lord Jagged slightly. Oh, I remember—you are in love with this lady, your—Amelia?'

'My Amelia!'

'I am not "your Amelia", Mr Carnelian,' she said firmly. And she became suspicious of Mrs Persson.

Mrs Persson was apologetic. 'You are from 1896. I was forgetting. You will forgive me, I hope, Mrs Underwood. I have heard so much about you. Your story is one of the greatest of our legends. I assure you, we are honoured to meet you in the flesh.'

Mrs Underwood frowned, guessing sarcasm, but there was none.

'You have heard—?'

'We are only a few, we gossip. We exchange experiences and tales, as travellers will, on the rare occasions when we meet. And the Centre, of course, is where we all congregate.'

The young man laughed. 'I don't think they're following you, Una.'

'I babble. You will be our guests?'

'You have a machine here?' said Mrs Underwood, hope dawning.

'We have a base. You have not heard of it? You are not yet members of the Guild, then?'

'Guild?' Mrs Underwood drew her eyebrows together. 'No.'

'The Guild of Temporal Adventurers,' explained Captain Bastable. 'The GTA.'

'I have never heard of it.'

'Neither have I,' said Jherek. 'Why do you have an association?'

Mrs Persson shrugged. 'Mainly so that we can exchange information. Information is of considerable help to those of us whom you could call "professional time

travellers.' She smiled self-deprecatingly. 'It is such a risky business, at best.'

'Indeed it is,' he agreed. 'We should love to accept your invitation. Should we not, Mrs Underwood?'

'Thank you, Mrs Persson.' Mrs Underwood was still not at ease, but she had control of her manners.

'We shall need to make two trips. I suggest, Oswald, that you take the Lat and Inspector Springer back with you and then return for us three.'

Captain Bastable nodded. 'Better check the hamper first. Just to be on the safe side.'

'Of course. Would you like to look, Mrs Underwood, and tell me if anything is missing?'

'It does not matter. I really think—'  
'It is of utmost importance. If anything is lost from it, we shall search meticulously until it is found. We have instruments for detecting almost everything.'

Mrs Underwood peered in. She sorted. 'Everything here, I think.'

'Fine. Time merely tolerates us, you know. We must not offend.'

Captain Bastable, the Lat and Inspector Springer were already in their boat. The motor whined again. The water foamed. They were away.

Mrs Persson watched it disappear before turning back to Jherek and Mrs Underwood. 'A lovely day. You have been here some while?'

'About a week, I would say,' Mrs Underwood smoothed at her ruined dress.

'So long as one avoids the water, it can be very beautiful. Many come to the Lower Devonian simply for the rest. If it were not for the eurypterids—the water scorpions it would be perfect. Of all Palaeozoic periods, I find it the nicest. And, of course, it is a particularly friendly age, permitting more anachronism than most. This is your first visit?'

'The first,' said Mrs Underwood. Her expression betrayed what propriety restrained her from stating, that she hoped it would be the last.

'It can be dull,' Mrs Persson acknowledged the implication. 'But if one wishes to relax, to re-plot one's course, take bearings—there are few better at this end of Time.' She yawned. 'Captain Bastable and I shall be glad to be on our way again, as soon as our caretaking duties are over and we are relieved. Another fortnight should see us back in some 20th century or other.'

'You seem to suggest that there are more than one,' said Jherek. 'Do you mean that different methods of recording history apply, or?'

'There are as many versions of history as there are dedicated time travellers,' Mrs Persson smiled. 'The difficulty lies in remaining in a consistent cycle. If one

cannot do so, then all sorts of shocks are likely—environmental re-adjustment becomes almost impossible—madness results. How many fashions in insanity, do you think, have been set by mentally disturbed temporal adventures? We shall never know!' She laughed. 'Captain Bastable, for instance, was an inadvertent traveller (it sometimes happens), and was on the borders of madness before we were able to rescue him. First one finds it is the future which does not correspond, and this is frightening enough, if you are not expecting it. But it is worst when you return to discover that your past has changed. You two, I take it, are fixed to a single band. Count yourselves lucky, if you do not know what to expect of multiversal time travelling.'

Jherek could barely grasp the import of her words and Mrs Underwood was lost completely, though she fumbled with the notion: 'You mean that time traveller we met who referred to Waterloo Circus was not from my time at all, but one which corresponded...?' She shook her head. 'You cannot mean it. My time no longer exists, because...?'

'Your time exists. Nothing ever perishes, Mrs Underwood. Forgive me for saying so, but you seem singularly ill-prepared for temporal adventuring. How did you come to choose the Lower Devonian, for instance?'

'We did not choose it,' Jherek told her. 'We set off for the End of Time. Our ship was in rather poor condition. It deposited us here although we were convinced we went forward.'

'Perhaps you did.'

'How can that be?'

'If you followed the cycle round, you arrived at the end and continued on to the beginning.'

'Time is cyclic, then?'

'It can be,' She smiled. 'There are spirals, too, as it were. None of us understands it very well, Mr Carnelian. We pool what information we have. We have been able to create some basic methods of protecting ourselves. But few can hope to understand very much about the nature of Time, because that nature does not appear to be constant. The Chronon Theory, for instance, which was very popular in certain cultures, has been largely discredited yet seems to apply in societies which accept the theory. Your own Morphail Theory has much to recommend it, although it does not allow for the permutations and complications. It suggests that Time has, as it were, only one dimension as if Space had only one. You follow me, Mr Carnelian?'

'To some extent.'

She smiled. 'And "to some extent" is all I follow myself. One thing the Guild always tells new members—"There are no

experts where Time is concerned". All we seek to do is to survive, to explore, to make occasional discoveries. Yet there is a particular theory which suggests that with every one discovery we make about Time, we create two new mysteries. Time can never be codified, as Space can be, because our very thoughts, our information about it, our actions based on that information all contribute to extend the boundaries, to produce new anomalies, new aspects of Time's nature. Do I become too abstract? If so, it is because I discuss something which is numinous—unknowable—perhaps truly metaphysical. Time is a dream—or a nightmare—from which there is never any waking. We who travel in Time are dreamers who occasionally share a common experience. To retain one's identity, to retain some sense of meaning in one's own life, that is all the time traveller can hope for—it is why the Guild exists. You are lucky that you are not adrift in the multiverse, as Captain Bastable was, for you can become like a drowning man who refuses to float, but flounders—and every wave which you set up in the Sea of Time has a habit of becoming a whole ocean in its own right.'

Mrs Underwood had listened, but she was disturbed. She lifted the lid of the hamper and opened an air-tight tin, offering Mrs Persson a brandy-snap.

They munched.

'Delicious,' said Mrs Persson. 'After the 20th, the 19th century has always been my favourite.'

'From what century are you originally?' Jherek asked, to pass the time.

'The 20th—mid-20th. I have a fair bit to do with that ancestor of yours. And his sister, of course. One of my best friends.' She saw that he was puzzled. 'You don't know him? Strange. Yet, Jagged your genes...?' She shrugged.

He was, however, eager. Here could be the answer he had sought from Jagged.

'Jagged has refused to be frank with me,' he told her, 'on that very subject. I would be grateful if you could enlighten me. He has promised to do so, on our return.'

But she was biting her lip, as if she had inadvertently betrayed a confidence. 'I can't,' she said. 'He must have reasons—I could not speak without first having his permission...'

'But there is a motive,' said Mrs Underwood sharply. 'It seems that he deliberately brought us together. We had had more than a hint that he could be engineering some of our misfortunes...'

'And saving us from others,' Jherek pointed out, to be fair. 'He insists disinterested, yet I am certain...'

'I cannot help you speculate,' said Mrs Persson. 'Here comes Captain Bastable with the boat.'

The small vessel was bouncing rapidly



# The Englishmans Lady

by  
RAVAN CHRISTCHILD



## PROLOGUE

*This England never did, nor never shall,  
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,  
But when it first did help to wound itself.*

Shakespeare *King John*

### 1. GLADSTONE AND GILES – FRIENDS?

A black hansom cab, drawn by a black horse, clattered through the swirling mist of the gaslit streets of London's Belgravia. Inside, its two occupants chatted pleasantly about small matters such as the show from which they were returning.

Both were dressed expensively in rich furs and silks. The man smoked a pipe, long and extravagantly curved, on which were carved tiny figures of humans and other animals, finely detailed down to the smallest accuracy. The woman was swathed in all sorts of furs, mink obviously being her favourite. She wore an abundance of jewellery; upon her fingers and around her neck there dangled lucent jade, opulent opal, sparkling sapphire, bloody ruby and glittering diamond. Her body had about it the soft, delicious fragrance of fresh clean jasmine.

The cab drew to a halt outside number thirty-one Eaton Place, and the man climbed down. He gave the woman assistance; she touched ground with an extravagant sigh of relief. The man paid the cabbie with a gold sovereign instructing him to keep the change. The cabbie thanked him graciously, then sped away in search of another fare.

They moved past the great palatial columns to the mansion's door, which she opened with her key. They stepped inside. He was the Right Honourable William Ewart Gladstone, Prime Minister of England, she was the Right Honourable Countess of Warwick. Countess Caroline Giles, wife of that eminent soldier, General Lord Frank Giles, commander-in-chief of all the British regiments serving on the Northern Plains of India. The General was serving his Queen in a way which had earned him many commendations and much favour in military, political and social circles. The empire admired him, his wife was the darling of England. Gas lamps went on in the drawing-room, and the curtains were drawn.

The Countess invited her guest to take a seat. He chose to sink into a deep, burgundy-red armchair. She poured a brandy for each of them, knowing from experience that this was Mr Gladstone's favourite drink. Rather partial to the old cognac, was the old boy. She sat beside his armchair, roasting her naked feet in front of the gas fire.

"Well, Billy, what is it I can do for you?"

The Prime Minister pulled his gaze from her creamy thighs and addressed her.

"Madam," he began, then, "... Caroline. . . I have an important task for you. Extremely important – at stake is the very Empire itself. Scotland Yard has discovered. . . that, sometime in the near future. . . I am to be assassinated."

She gasped melodramatically, took a hefty gulp of the cognac, and let him continue.

"That would be bad enough," a wry smile crossed his face at

this point, "but the assassination, which is to be carried out by some anarchist terrorists, is to be the signal for the execution of my. . . er, our. . . senior army officers and political staff in India, which in turn is to be the signal for the start of an anarchist revolution. Madam, they are plotting against the Empire!" The Countess of Warwick was aghast at this news.

"No! It cannot be. Not – the Empire." But she saw him nodding his head.

"My God! Why? What harm have we done them?"

The Prime Minister shrugged and sipped his drink. "Well, there was that incident in Calcutta last year – when your husband's men looted the town, raped all the women and put most of the men in either the burning-ghats or the hospitals. That might have got 'em going, y'know."

"But. . . they were. . . animals, the people in that town. They were Indians, too."

"So are the terrorists."

There was a long pause. Then she said, "But the British people, the men who work and make money, money which keeps the Empire going – these people will surely not stand by and see the fruits of their labours being stolen by a bunch of. . . Indians?"

Gladstone agreed. "I agree. If the Empire falls, we must ask ourselves, what will be the reaction of the British people? Surely, they shall lose faith in their rulers. And then. . ."

The Countess closed her eyes in an attempt to shut out the fearful pictures. Men in the streets. . . strikes! . . . loss of profits! . . . revolution!!!!

Where would it end?

"Prime Minister," she said soberly, "in what way can I help you?"

Mr Gladstone smiled. "Your task is simple. You must warn your husband. We cannot use the new wireless, you see, due to bad atmospherics, or some such technical matter. And our land lines have been cut by the Palestinian Commandoes."

The Countess drained her glass dry. That was yet another nightmare – the Palestinian Commandoes were probably the most dedicated, dangerous and fanatically anti-British group of people in the world.

"I have booked you a cabin on the airship *Clive Of India*, which sails for Singapore at noon tomorrow."

"First class, I hope."

"But of course. Now, then. . ."

"More brandy?" She got up, smoothed her dresses provocatively, and poured some more cognac into the glasses. Then she said, giving him back his glass, "Let's play the piano."

The Prime Minister rose, groaning with the pain from his arthritis, which was now quite bad in both legs. They crossed the room to the grand piano, and Mr Gladstone sat on the velvet stool and proceeded to play *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, which should have reminded him of the fact that the Irish Home Rule Act was being passed on the morrow, but didn't because he was too busy fumbling with his trembling left hand up the Countess's long dress. A garter twanged. She kissed him. The old sod was a bit past it, she thought as she undid his flies, but it was a laugh, and it paid well.

### 2. GILES AND TERRIER – STRANGERS?

Lady Caroline Giles, Countess of Warwick, stared from the window of the VIP Lounge, out across the vast concrete plain of

Osterley Air Park. She saw airships of many colours and many sizes, moored to tall slender masts up which travelled lift cages containing passengers or engineers.

Unheard by the Countess a man entered the lounge. He was tall, aged about thirty, with a small beard and clear blue eyes. He wore a high top-hat, a knee-length velvet overcoat with heavy brass buttons, gold epaulettes and gold cuffs. His white shirt was exuberantly frilled, the cuffs turned up over his coat cuffs. The blue trousers he wore were slightly flared.

He cleared his throat in a loud, conspicuous way.

Countess Caroline turned in surprise.

"Hello," he said, taking off his hat and bowing.

"Eh, hello."

"I am Captain John Terrier, serving with the Imperial Army in India."

"The British Army," she corrected him. "India is a part of Britain, you know, Captain."

"Er, yes."

"I am the Countess of Warwick, Caroline Giles, aristocrat-at-arms, counter-insurgency expert and ex-Lesbian." She giggled.

It wasn't all that funny, but William Gladstone was getting on, and he did have some weird ideas. She felt like hitting out at someone, and mistakenly hit herself.

"Pleased to meet you," said Captain John Terrier, undeterred. "I believe I am serving under your husband, Lord Frank Giles." "Francis? Yes, that would seem likely."

They both felt silent, and the Countess resumed gazing out of the window.

"Which is the *Clive Of India*?" she asked presently.

Captain Terrier, who had poured himself a scotch without offering her one, moved to the window and pointed to one of the airships being refuelled for its long journey. It was clearly the largest on the field, with a hull of dazzling gold and red, large Union Jacks painted onto the tailfins, and the arms of the East Indian Airship Company intagliated upon the hull.

An impressive sight, the *Clive*.

"Are you sailing on the *Clive*, then?" Captain Terrier inquired of her.

"Yes, I am travelling to Chandigarh, the capital of India." "To see your husband, I presume?"

"Yes."

"A lucky man."

She moved away from his discreetly probing hand, to the cocktail bar, where she poured herself a large gin. Terrier switched the wireless set on. A phonograph record was just finishing – Mozart's Ninth Symphony. Captain Terrier began to hum the tune when the announcer broke in.

"This is the BBC Home Service.

"The News.

"The airship *Gladstone* has crashed in Turkey, killing all of the eight hundred people aboard. The *Gladstone* mysteriously exploded over Constantinople, and dropped like a stone to the Turkish mountains. A team of Scotland Yard experts are on their way to investigate the incident. A police spokesman indicated the possibility that a Palestinian anarchist group mercilessly sabotaged the ship. So far, there has been no comment from the airship's owners, Jerusalem Airlines. Mr Fred Cohen, the company chairman, has barricaded his mansion in Kensington.

"News has literally just been received from the New States of

The West that Mr Joe Pasini, the Vice President, AKA "Bugsy" Malone, AKA "The Boss", has been arrested on charges of murder, bank robbery, conspiracy to commit bank robbery, conspiracy to commit various atrocities upon anybody who stood in the way, robbery with violence, wearing a false beard, conspiracy to commit burglary, arson, and being Italian. Mr Pasini says that he is innocent of all charges against him, and claims that "some poor guy has framed me".

"Leaders of the clandestine Workers Combinations have sent a letter to the Prime Minister threatening to call an illegal strike throughout the country unless the Combinations are made legal and unless workers are paid wages. This demand represents a tough problem for Mr Gladstone who is backed by businessmen bitterly hostile to the Combinations, and also to workers in general."

Captain Terrier switched off the wireless.

"Nothing but bad news. The world is such an evil place really, Captain."

"I doubt it, Madam. People perhaps, but not the world."

There was an announcement over the tannoy.

"The liner *Clive Of India* is due to leave in five minutes, travelling to Singapore via Cologne, Budapest, Baghdad, Chandigarh and Mandalay. All those travelling on this flight are requested to leave from Gate Three. Thank you."

The woman clicked off.

"What an enchanting voice," said the Countess. "She reminds me of a girl I once knew."

Captain Terrier took her elbow, smiling. "Shall we go?"

They stepped into a padded, cylindrical lift cage. Terrier pressed the button marked GATE THREE. After a perfectly silent ride, they stepped out onto a moving pathway which carried them all the way to the ship. As they rode up the tall mooring mast, Captain Terrier inquired of the Countess: "What cabin are you in?"

She searched through her handbag until she found the ticket.

"Alpha six."

"Aha. I'm in alpha two. Just down the corridor."

"Perhaps we'll see a lot of each other, then?"

"I hope so."

They entered the golden airship.

### 3. MITCHELL – A SURVIVOR?

Big Ben had been silent for two years. The only sound in Westminster now was the sound of dead leaves blowing in the autumn wind.

As Steve Mitchell walked through the deserted London streets, tears came into his eyes. He came to Parliament Square, and looked at the once grand, now dilapidated, buildings. Visions came into his mind of the scene outside these same buildings on that fateful night years ago.

Of course, it had been bound to happen. It was the signal for speedy collapse.

Mitchell sank to his knees and wept. Then he stood up and walked the silent avenue of Birdcage Walk to the burned, gutted shell of The Palace. He gave a loud cry of despair which broke the evening gloom, but didn't help his own.

He climbed into the helicopter which he had left in St James' Park, and soared away.

#### 4. TERRIER AND GILES – DANCERS?

Captain Terrier was doing the foxtrot with Countess Caroline Giles of Warwick. They were in the self-stabilising Empress Ballroom, dancing to the sound of Harvey's Rag-Time, Jazz-Time Band, all three of them. There was Harvey himself, a tall, bald Irishman, sex-starved, who tried to play a trumpet. Then there was a squat Indian gentleman with an unpronounceable name. He always wore a turban, and chewed hashish whilst performing. He was the bass player.

The pianist was a highly desirable female with short, blonde hair, dazzling red lipstick and large, voluptuous breasts, which pushed out the sequined satin blouse she was wearing.

As the foxtrot finished, Harvey announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, less 'ave a big 'and ferr the luvly Miss Stephanie Mitchell."

She bowed and the audience of aristocrats and well to do businessmen (as well as the odd politician and military man here and there) all clapped as she began to sing an extremely corny song written by Harvey.

"When you're down,  
Look around,  
I'll be smiling,"

(One of the Indian's strings broke.)

"Right behind you.  
When you're near,  
My eyes tear,  
I start crying,  
Right behind you.  
Oh my love,  
My lovely queen,  
I need you baby,  
I need you here."

Everybody clapped again, the music sped up and Stephanie proceeded to prance around on the stage. She unzipped her dress down the front, and unbuttoned her blouse (all in time to the music). A heavy globular breast fell out. Hurriedly she squeezed it back in again. The audience laughed, they were having a ball. Harvey almost had an orgasm.

Captain Terrier was tickling the inside of Countess Caroline's thigh. She was past caring, too drunk to worry about what he did to her. She laughed uproariously as Stephanie fell off the stage.

"Come on," Captain Terrier whispered in her ear, "time you were in bed."

She giggled and mumbled, "Mmm, yeah, c'mon then love," her aristocratic poise and sophisticated disguise ripped off by brandy and left, last seen vanishing into the nearest garbage can.

As Captain Terrier half-dragged her across the ballroom, he was smiling. He was still smiling when they were in her cabin and he was gently pulling the clothes from her body.

He buried his head between her thighs, and she began to throw her arms about, sighing.

"More, more, gimme more."

Captain Terrier took his head away and replaced it with his

hand, whilst his lips went to work on her magnificent breasts.

#### 5. VARISHOFF – A PROPHET?

Prince Varishoff III of Moldavia rose to address his Parliament. "Gentlemen – and lady – tonight we are faced with the biggest crisis ever. We are getting our oil, our uranium, our wheat. Our businesses are booming. Materially, our country is at its highest peak ever. Yet we are faced with the threat of the collapse of our society, the threat of Revolution. Outside this building stand at least a thousand men with blazing torches, stamping and shouting, threatening. These men are the same people who were uncaring when the American aircraft accidentally dropped its bomb on us. What is happening to our country? For God's sake, what is happening?"

The house was silent as he sat down. One member of Parliament whispered to another, "Society is on the verge of collapse." His aged friend nodded gravely. "It seems, then, that Mr Dorrell was right."

#### 6. GILES AND TERRIER – FRIENDS?

Stephanie Mitchell paraded around the ballroom wearing nothing but a pair of boots. She chose a table at which sat a lonely young man, and sat down on it, splaying her legs wide. Hesitantly, he reached forward and touched her. She shook her head and continued to parade.

Harvey was charging up and down the length of the keyboard, so hot and frustrated that he couldn't remember what notes to play. The Glory of Our Empire kept on prancing round and round, shaking her hips and jostling her breasts.

Meanwhile, Captain John Terrier and the Countess of Warwick were enjoying orthodox sex, under the sheets, with the light off.

"Captain..."

"Shush."

"Cap'n. I donno w's gor into me, but... ohh, God, ohh..."

She hung over the edge of the bed, weeping as Captain Terrier wiped her delicate skin.

He took her in his arms.

"There," he said consolingly, "wasn't that nice?"

She vomited. "Frank..."

"Frank's not here. He's in bloody India."

"Oh my God. What've I done?"

Captain Terrier snorted. "Done? Nothing evil or unusual, I can assure you. Don't worry about betraying Frank."

"It's not Frank I'm betraying."

"Oh. I see."

Captain Terrier rose, dressed, and went up onto the observation deck.

Looking down through the cold air which blew in his face, he saw the lights of the super-city of Antwerp. With fifteen million nine hundred thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight people in it already, attracted by the life-giving waters of its radioactive mineral springs, the town was showing no signs of stopping its growth. Soon it would collapse under its own weight, or be driven into the sea by the pressure of its own inhabitants.

Captain Terrier forgot about Antwerp and thought about Cologne. They would soon be there. Beneath him, the Captain

heard nuclear engines humming.

## THE ENGLISHMAN'S LADY (INTERLUDE)

*Steve Mitchell and the aristocratic Lady Caroline Giles sat in the large, open sitting room of her mansion near Northampton, sipping Indian tea from bone china cups, watching small dots speed along the distant white strip of the M1 motorway. The thundering noise of the heavy diesel trucks carrying pipes, bricks, chemicals and beer was incongruous with the pleasant little lawns on what remained of her estates. A butterfly fluttered by.*

## 1. THE CAVE – A SANCTUARY?

Johnny Terrier scurried into the cave. Wrapped in furs though he was, he shivered, for the temperature in this mountain valley in northern Norway was far from warm, or even cold. He and his friends from London had come to the Arctic Circle in order to avoid joining the war. They lived in a massive cavern near Polmak, which was on the border with Finland.

Also hiding out in these hills were revolutionists and freedom fighters. One such a man was Vladimir Ulyanov, presently exiled from his homeland in Russia. As Johnny entered the immense cavern, Ulyanov was chewing on a hunk of barley bread, and making profound political and philosophical statements as he swilled some cheap red wine from an unlabelled bottle.

"Development repeats, as it were, stages that have already been passed, but repeats them in a different way, on a different and higher level." He hiccupped and noticed with interest that his small, wolfish beard was soaked with wine.

"That is exactly what I have been saying." The voice came from the back of the group of people, gathered around the blazing fire. Its owner stepped forward, a tall man, aged and bald, a bushy beard resting on his chest.

"Go on," said Johnny to the old Jedekiah Jesus, his philosopher friend whom he had met in India.

"Well, what our good friend Ulyanov has just said is confirmation of what I have always been saying – that man's life is cyclical; that is, a man lives many lives in succession, each much the same as the other, but each being more advanced as the cycle progresses."

Ulyanov burped and grinned.

"See," he said, with slurred speech, "you miss somethin' out . . . you take da relizhus, idealistic view, dat man is a spiritchaw fing . . . but in fact . . . ohhh . . ." Ulyanov keeled over and lay spreadeagled on the cave floor, unconscious and unrousable. Johnny tutted, then moved closer towards the fire.

They heard a Phantom jet fighter scream overhead, and explosions far off in the distance, towards Tromsø.

## 2. THE SLUM – A HIDEOUT?

Steve Mitchell sat in a candle-lit tenement room in the midst of the ruins. Light flickered across the walls, illuminating a post on the wall, the only decor in the room. On black glossy paper was a bright red sun into which was flying the white silhouette of a wide-winged bird.

Underneath were the words: DYING IS FLYING.

Mitchell was reading a tattered manuscript written by a philosopher friend of his who had been killed in the riots. The manuscript was entitled *The Transformation*. He was on the chapter involved with Entropy – Progress or Regression? The question mark had been drawn very large and very black with a thick felt pen.

Mitchell was deeply pursuing his friend's line of thought when the slum building was rocked by the shock-wave from a nuclear-bomb blast. Steve Mitchell fell to the floor, unconscious – or dead. A rat began to nibble at the blood congealed around his nostrils.

## 3. THE CAVE – A BATTLEFIELD?

Ulyanov was recovered, but drunk, still pouring out his revolutionary clichés.

"The philosophers" – he belched – "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, however, to change it!"

Johnny Terrier chewed a blade of grass. "Sounds like something I read once."

Ulyanov shook his drunken old head. "Uh-uh. That's totally 'riginal. Fought it up myself."

Johnny spat on the cave floor.

"They locked my brother up in a cold, tall cage for saying such things. Why ain't you inside, huh?"

Johnny's cockney accent and manner of speech was slipping through his guise of sophistication.

"Could be, p'raps you ain't wot yer seem ta be? Could be the Emperors ain't so angry wiv yer after or? Eh? Bugger off, pal. I's 'ad enuff."

Ulyanov grinned obviously misinterpreting Johnny's tone. "What is it, Mr Terrier? Do you think that we don't need a revolution? Do you think that one day, God is going to come floating down through the clouds? To help us out? To save us all?" His tone was deliberately mocking. "Oh, how I wish I could be so naive."

Johnny yelled a war-cry and leapt at Ulyanov, bowling him over. They rolled towards the cave entrance, locked in mortal combat, fists flying, feet kicking, teeth grinding. The tribe leader, a dark-skinned man called Yango, stood up to prevent others interfering.

"According to our code, the fight must continue to the finish. Whoever wins shall be the one who's correct. So be it."

The rest sat down and watched Johnny and Ulyanov kicking at each other. An F4 Phantom Jet Fighter with Icelandic markings flew overhead. Yango watched it. "Quick, inside. No, too bloody late. He'll have seen us now. Oh, bugger it."

He looked back as Ulyanov's body bounced down the hillside until he had vanished from sight. He screamed once on the way down.

Johnny Terrier stood up and dusted himself.

"Come on," said Yango. "They'll be here soon. We must be ready."

Johnny looked at him with a puzzled eye. "Who'll be here soon?" Yango looked scared. "The Emperor of Iceland's men."

Tears came to Johnny's eyes. "Can't they leave us alone? Must the war always chase us, always hound us across our various

worlds? Won't the bloody thing go away?"

"Mars is high in the sky this epoch," Yango observed. Johnny clipped the magazine into an M60.

#### 4. THE PARK — A WORLD?

Two tramps sat on the green park bench one autumn, their long brown coats dangling on the dusty ground. They spoke not a word. As they sat in silence, they watched the body of an eight-year-old Indian girl, swinging in the breeze, hanging from a tree.

After an hour, the two tramps went their separate ways.

During the night, one came back, hauled the girl's body down from the branch on which it hung and carried it away.

#### 5. THE HIGHWAY — A WAR ZONE?

Karen Black swung the car to the left to avoid the black cat which sat in the centre of the road licking its paw. She stopped the car by the kerb, and as she sat there recovering from the shock, she saw two teenaged girls come down from the hills beside the road. They carried Schmeisser sub-machine guns. As they crept stealthily across the highway, the trailing one shot the other through the back of the head.

#### 6. THE CLUB — ANOTHER WORLD?

Captain John Terrier escorted the Countess Caroline Giles of Warwick into the Playroom, the best known night-club of French-occupied Cologne. Coloured lights flashed at them from all angles as they entered the Bastille Bar, where electric guitar music was playing at a volume just below the threshold of pain.

The service in the Bastille Bar was by waitress, and so Captain Terrier and the Countess sat at a table of smooth green onyx. Terrier ordered the drinks; two martinis, one (his own) with a measure of Scotch whisky added.

They sat and watched the guitarist, an ambitious young man called Erik (The Red) Klampton, who was backed by a group called the Dominoes. He struck Captain Terrier as being extremely good with a guitar; the Countess thought him rather ugly.

They finished their drinks as The Red was replaced by another unknown guitarist, a negro by the name of James Marshall McHendrix, who started off with a beautiful improvised rendition of God Save The Queen followed by a masterpiece called Puli Gap.

The two English people sipped more drinks, and more and more, as the musicians were swapped and changed and replaced. There were David Bowie, David Berry, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, The Applejacks, Bo Diddley, Dean Martin, Tiny Tim, Anthony Newley, Roxy Music, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Freddie and the Dreamers, the Searchers, Elvis Presley, Hawkwind, Tommy Steel, The Hollies, The Springfielders, Frankie Laine, Johnny Ray, Kenny Lynch, Bryan Ferry, The Electric Light Orchestra, Frank Sinatra, The Rolling Stones, The Seekers, The Mamas and the Papas, Little Richard, Deep Purple, David Cassidy, Zoot Money, Rudolf Valentino, Manfred Mann, The Isley Brothers, The Dave Clarke Five, Ike

and Tina Turner, The Righteous Brothers, and finally, to round off three hectic days and nights, they brought on the all-female group Fanny.

By this time Captain Terrier was exhausted and Countess Caroline had collapsed in a heap on the floor. Terrier, his brain functioning only thanks to several handfuls of amphetamines, staggered to the lavatory. When he came back a man he knew to be an old pirate ship's captain was attempting to rape the Countess. Captain Terrier pushed the pirate away. The pirate pulled an ancient flintlock pistol from his waistband and pointed it at Terrier. Terrier moved back several paces.

"Now see here..." He could not recall the words he had been about to threaten him with. The proprietor of the Playroom had approached, but was keeping a safe distance. The pirate ripped the Countess's dress from her body. Then Terrier launched himself into action. The pirate pulled the trigger of the pistol, and it blew up in his hand. Captain Terrier clasped Countess Caroline's hand and pulled her from the area, leaving the pirate rolling on the floor, screaming in agony, his right hand lying by itself in a pool of blood.

#### 7. THE CAVE — A MEETING PLACE?

Johnny Terrier's recoilless M60 rifle sent a bullet of hot steel singing above the snow to sink into the skull of an Icelandic Cavalryman's impressive mount. Troops belonging to the Emperor of Iceland were swarming about outside the cave, eager to get their hands on the hated "pacifists" and revolutionists. Johnny Terrier and company were not in the least inclined towards the philosophy of pacifism at that moment. They were fighting beside the revolutionists, against the common enemy — the soldiers who wouldn't leave them alone.

A cannon-ball screamed into the cavern, smashing in the skull of one of Johnny's friends. Mercifully, Johnny did not observe this, being concerned with repelling the imperialistic Icelandic warriors.

The revolutionists' Gatling Gun gattled and mowed down the front line of Icelandic troops who had advanced perilously close to the cave entrance. The arctic snows were fast becoming stained blood red. A fighter plane came over the horizon and soon began strafing the cave.

"Christ!" Yango cursed. "What the hell do we do now?"

"There must be an ack-ack gun somewhere," said Johnny. "Didn't this use to be an old Nazi base?"

"Of course!"

"Of course." He began to dash around the vast cavern looking for an anti-aircraft weapon. Meanwhile the plane cut down six of his friends, among them his cousin and lover, the beautiful Karen Black.

Near the back of the cavern was the entrance to a tunnel, which had its other entrance in Finland. As he approached this tunnel, Johnny fancied he heard somebody clambering along it. He clicked the bolt of his rifle as silently as possible, then hid himself in the shadows. He watched as a fur-clad man came from the tunnel. Johnny gasped. Vladimir Ulyanov smiled.

"How the hell did you get here?" Johnny growled as he stepped into the light. "I killed you with my own hands."

"Feet," Ulyanov corrected him, grinning. "Us revolutionists."



You just can't get rid of us, can you? As is the war, so are we." Johnny frowned. "Huh?"

Ulyanov put a gloved hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Eternal, my boy," he muttered. "Eternal." He walked off to find a gun. Johnny sat upon a rock and thought about the world.

## THE ENGLISHMAN'S LADY (INTERLUDE)

*They listened to the birds singing in the treetops and the trucks throbbing along the concrete ribbon of the motorway. Sparrows fluttered and splashed about in a marble bird-bath, as Steve Mitchell poured Indian tea from a porcelain teapot into bone-china teacups. They looked out over the ever-diminishing estates.*

## 1. LONDON – CROWS

Prime Minister William Gladstone was escorted by a heavily armed group of policemen through a crowd of shouting, angry men. Troops from the Household Cavalry were all around the Houses of Parliament as Mr Gladstone entered. Periodically, the soldiers had cause to fire shots above the crowd in order to quieten the men down.

Black carrion crows settled on the eaves of the great, burnt building. The sun vanished into the River Thames, and torches were lit, their flames casting eerie flickering shadows about Parliament Square.

It began to snow. Steve Mitchell peered through the snowflakes and felt an unpleasant sensation in his stomach.

"This," he thought, "is it."

## 2. AUSCHWITZ – TIGERS

The men moved silently across the birch grove, the moonlight playing across their faces. One of the men, the leader, looked at his two watches and told them to hurry up. They increased their pace through the tangled undergrowth of the forest until before their eyes it stood — the gleaming city of Auschwitz, built of flintstone human bone smoothed to perfection, and gracefully curved girders of precious metal. Soft lights shone from the city's many windows.

The men crossed the first of the great parks, named The Birch Grove. They crossed the wide super-highway which ran across the city at a height of a hundred feet. They crept through deserted alleyways in that suburb of the city called Birch Grove. They darted across the huge Jewish Cemetery in the centre of the suburb. Then, they entered the skyscraper building which housed the offices of Rudolf Hoess & Co., suppliers of domestic equipment.

The door to the Hoess office section was locked. No cause for concern, one of the men shot the lock off. Then they all entered the offices, and began to search methodically through the files. When they had what they wanted, they left, remaining only long enough to tear up a photograph which had been hanging on the wall of Hoess' personal office. On the way out they shot the caretaker, were attacked by two tigers owned by a Swiss-Austrian security firm, and stole a million worthless Deutschmarks from an office.

Soon, they were back in the Jewish cemetery, digging up a grave.

## 3. BERLIN – SQUIRRELS

Squirrels chewed on acorns as Steve Mitchell and Karen Black crossed the leaf-covered courtyard of the Berlin Palace. They walked up the steps into the old grey building.

"Schickleguber wasn't mad," Karen shook her head as Steve offered her a Coke from a vending machine in the Main Hall. She went on. "What Schickleguber did, anybody would've had to do had they been faced with restoring Germany to its old position in the world. He was completely logical and rational about the whole thing — even his irrationality was rationally organized. The fact that people got hurt — well, people are always getting hurt. What matters is history. Schickleguber was a part of a historical process."

Steve swilled the Coke around in his mouth before swallowing it. "Yes," he said morosely, staring into the can. "Yes, I suppose we can't let people stand in the way of historical decay." Karen smiled. "It's nice here. I think we'll stay."

"For a couple of days, maybe." He threw the Coke can over his shoulder. It clanged against an old suit of armour.

They walked through the hall and up the stairs at the far end, into a bedroom. As she undid his trousers, Steve thought about Schickleguber, Germany, England and himself.

Afterwards, they walked hand in hand through the pretty gardens of the Reichstag where they met an old man.

"Hello," said Steve to the man.

"Hello, youngsters," said the old man. It was surprising how many people knew English that well.

"We were just speaking of Schickleguber," Karen told him. "Anyone I know?"

Steve smiled. "You'll get to hear of him. Probably when the rest of the world does. Probably when it's too late."

The old man shrugged. "I'll probably be dead and gone by then." Steve nodded. Karen said she felt ill, so they bade the man farewell, and walked on through the floral gardens.

"Steve. . . I feel out of place, somehow."

Steve paused reflectively. "Out of time, more probably."

Karen usually ignored his philosophical statements, and she ignored that one. Steve couldn't be bothered to pursue the subject.

"Steve. . ." Karen began as they crossed the tree-lined Hamburger Strasse. "Steve, I am, I think I'm. . . I'm pregnant."

Steve squeezed her tightly. "Really? Isn't everything?"

"Oh shut up."

He apologized. "Sorry. Well, I hope it's a boy. I think we'll give him Poland. Or perhaps. . . no, not France. Poland, I think."

Karen was not amused. "Give him the bloody world. Nobody's left to stop you. Nobody would worry, anyway, even if there was anybody."

Steve nodded grimly, the unborn child forgotten. "Yes, it did get pretty bad towards the end there, didn't it?"

"Did you say bad or sad?"

"Bad. Sad as well, though."

They were strolling across the fields beside the lake, going in the direction of Potsdam.

"Steve. . . if we have a child now. . . it'll be the beginning of a new race."

"What about us?"

"Oh, us. We're just the same old bodies carrying on, doing history's work. We must've. . . died. . . in that explosion last year. We must have. Everybody else in London did."

"Yes," said Steve, "all eighty-three of them."

"But they were all on the outskirts. We were in Notting Hill, practically sitting on top of Ground Zero. We couldn't have stood a chance. Not a hope in hell."

Steve turned away. "I'd rather not continue with this discussion, if you don't mind. I find it rather distressing."

He sat down on the bank of a narrow stream. Karen sat beside him.

"I thought you didn't mind death."

"Not when it happens to other people, I don't mind it."

"Stop joking. You always said death didn't scare you."

He threw a stone into the water. "I didn't — when it was miles — sorry, years — away. But you're trying to tell me *I am* dead. That's too much."

He stood up and started to walk briskly back to the city. Karen caught up with him, and decided to change the subject. "There was that old man."

"What old man?"

"The old man in the Reichstag grounds."

"What about him?"

"He exists. He is in the world. We're not the only ones left alive."

Steve sighed. "Tough luck, junior," he drawled, patting her pregnant stomach. "That would've been some inheritance." They walked the rest of the way in silence, watching the squirrels.

#### 4. IN THE AIRSHIP — SPIDERS

In Cologne, the airship *Clive Of India* had picked up some entertainers — a group called 'Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders from Mars'. This group was playing in the huge baroque Empress Ballroom. Captain John Terrier was sitting at a table drinking sparkling champagne while Countess Caroline Giles danced closely with the female entertainer Stephanie Mitchell. Well, he thought, you win some and you lose some. For the last two days, the Countess had been able to spare no time for him, as she had been having the most tempestuous affair with Miss Mitchell. As Captain Terrier watched, the two women kissed passionately, Caroline's hand caressing Stephanie's breasts beneath her jersey.

Suddenly, Ziggy Stardust did an unpleasant thing. Opening two large crates which were on the stage beside him, he reached in and grabbed handfuls of the contents. He threw the fat, bloated spiders around the ballroom. They fell into people's drinks, into their posh coiffures, between their teeth, onto their clothes, down their throats, and everywhere else. The ballroom floor was a seething mass of huge black spiders scurrying about, getting trodden on and making ugly blotches on the tiles. The manager burst into the ballroom, along with half a dozen large men who all wore identical black suits.

"Mr Stardust!" the manager screamed, "this is a very tasteless trick. Okay boys."

The heavies drew Schmeisser machine pistols and shot the band dead. The aristocratic, political and military figures in the ballroom were escorted out, given free brandy and sent to their cabins. Then, during the night, the spider-filled ballroom was filled with gas.

#### 5. CALCUTTA — FLIES

In Calcutta, there was a cricket field. Two platoons of the Gurkhas were playing in a rather English-village-ish setting.

General Lord Frank Giles and Major Stewart Cox, his aide-de-camp, sat in deckchairs watching the match.

Big black flies danced around them.

"Ah, civilization," said Lord Frank.

"Bloody wogs aren't too civilized, sir. My men caught a group of them today, trying to smuggle opium to . . . to England." He spoke the word with a trembling, emotional voice.

"Opium, eh? Yes, major, that, I would say is typical. I say, old chap, how about something to drink?"

"Tea, sir?"

"Scotch, I think."

Cox summoned a Burmese waiter and instructed him to get the drinks.

"Hear the *Gladstone* had an accident."

Cox swatted at a fly. "Yes, crashed in Turkey. Bally things were always unsafe. Never did trust 'em."

"What's that?"

"Airships, sir."

"Ah, yes, airships. A fine thing, the airship. . . ." The Burmese waiter approached carrying a silver tray on which were two glasses filled with Scotch whisky. Cox paid the man, took the drinks, then settled down to watch the cricket.

"Opium, eh?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Opium."

"Oh, opium. Yes, sir. Nasty."

"You say your men caught some of the rascals at it, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Disgusting."

The batsman hit a six. Everybody was too hot to cheer.

"Cheeky too."

"What's that, sir?"

"Smuggling."

"Oh, smuggling. Yes, sir. Cheeky."

"You say your men caught some of the rascals at it, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Disgusting."

The bowler got the batsman LBW. The batsman strolled off the field, anxious to get into the shade. He passed the bat to the next man in.

"Bound for England, eh?"

"What's that, sir?"

"The opium."

"Oh, the opium. Yes, sir. England."

Both men peered at the Union Jack flying above the town. "England."

"There'll always be an England, sir. Always."

"Didn't know you were a philosopher, Cox."

There was a loud crack, and the red ball flew through the air to score another six.

"England."

"England."

"That bloody opium could've destroyed England, Cox."

"Either the opium or the bloody Indians."

They were silent. Giles was happy that he had finally managed to articulate himself. Cox was trying to decide whether he hated Indians more than opium, or vice versa.

"Probably a bloody bomb."



"What's that, sir?"

"The Gladstone."

"What about it, sir?"

"Oh, Cox, really . . . for God's sake, listen, man."

"Sorry, sir."

"I was saying — it could've been a bomb."

"Oh, yes. Possibly. Probably planted by a wog."

"The owner was a Jew."

Cox didn't know what was worse — a Jew or an Indian.

"Or bombs."

"More than one?"

"Exactly."

Jews, he decided, were better. They had more money.

"Don't see how they imagined they'd get away with it."

"Probably just planted them and scarpered."

"I mean, they must've known we were onto them."

"A reckless lot. No respect for property or life."

"I wonder if it was a plot deliberately aimed at the Empire?"

"Probably the initiation of a terrorist war in the air."

"If our workers had got their hands on that opium . . ."

"If our workers are intimidated . . ."

The batsman was struck on the head by the cricket ball.

Nobody moved to help him, except the wicket-keeper.

Giles brushed a fly from his face.

## 6. LONDON — JACKALS

The talk had gone on for hours. Throughout England it had been relayed via television and radio. It was obvious to most, especially the older, more experienced members of the community that the government must fall. It fell that night. At three in the morning, Mr Gladstone rose to address the House and the Nation. He said a few words, then offered his resignation. As he did so, he burst into tears, crying, "England, England, England."

Steve Mitchell was watching the scene on television. He too wept as the men outside Parliament set fire to a Union Jack, and raised a black cross above the Parliament buildings.

There was a loud bang, actually caused by a soldier shooting at a jackal crossing Westminster bridge. Then the rioting began.

The jackals swarmed in from the south banks of the river. The jackals were closely followed by people, members of the lowest class in society, who flooded across the few bridges that remained standing. They piled into Westminster until it was impossible for anybody to move.

The year was 197—.

## 7. BUDAPEST — LICE

The *Clive* had stopped in Budapest for several days. Captain Terrier and Countess Caroline decided to spend a night in the city. But first, they went shopping. As they entered the Budapest branch of Debenhams, a pair of Arab-types leapt from a passing trolley bus and fired machine guns wildly into the crowd. Then they vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

Countess Caroline had been hit. She was dying. From her bleeding, smashed lips came the information which she had been on her way to deliver to her husband. Having given the infor-

mation to Captain Terrier, she died. He cradled her body in his arms, sobbing, unable to believe that she had gone. After an hour, the police took her to the mortuary.

Captain Terrier spent the night alone, brooding. He slept not a wink. He got up at five in the morning and went out into the city to find the mortuary. The mortuary was a sleazy, filthy place, at the end of a series of dark, stinking corridors littered with tramps of various nationalities, and their waste products. Naturally enough, the mortuary had a stale smell about it, the putrid, sickening smell of death which made one's stomach void itself painfully unless one was used to it. Captain Terrier was used to it.

He asked to take one last, longing look at Caroline's body. The short, shifty-eyed attendant agreed and led him to a cabinet. He pulled open a drawer.

Captain Terrier screamed and retched agonisingly. The body of Countess Caroline Giles of Warwick lay at peace, half eaten by maggots, cockroaches and lice which could be seen crawling about on the yellowed skin. Her eye sockets were empty.

## 8. NORWAY — CARNIVORES

Vladimir Ulyanov was operating the ack-ack gun which Yango had found. Johnny Terrier was holding in his hands the head of his beloved cousin Karen. A hundred yards away, lay the rest of her body, smashed beyond recognition by the aircraft's shells. Her once bright blue eyes stared up at him. They were beginning to glaze over.

Johnny wept.

His cousin had died smiling.

Angry, he seized his rifle and went to the entrance of the great cavern, firing off round after round, a one man army. But he was not getting the results. He was angry but impotent. Frustrated, he leapt off the ledge and plummeted to the ground. He had always wanted to fly.

He hit the rocky valley floor. Ah, beautiful oblivion, he thought.

The Icelandic warriors picked him up and took him back to the base.

## THE ENGLISHMAN'S LADY (INTERLUDE)

*She sat in a rocking chair, he on a rug. They were outside, on the green lawn. It was springtime. Daffodils and tulips surrounded them. The chirping of the birds drowned the vibrations from the motorway. Steve Mitchell gazed into her eyes and sipped his cup of Indian tea.*

## 1. ILLNESS

Captain John Terrier remained in his bunk for most of the rest of the journey, a bottle of Haig whisky always beside him. Occasionally, he would vomit. Once, he was so bad that he had to be taken to the sick bay. The doctor diagnosed dysentery, prescribed some medicine, and instructed Terrier to remain in his cabin. He was pleased to do so. Only once, Stephanie Mitchell went to see him. Having discovered that he could not give her the sexual fun she had been craving for, she left, in a

temper, having insulted him in a loud, raucous voice which could be heard right down the corridor.

Captain Terrier occasionally experienced a nauseating delirium, in which he had unpleasant dreams concerning the late Countess of Warwick.

As he made frantic love to her, the skin on her body was gradually becoming blackened, puscules raising themselves to the surface. The lips curled back in a feral snarl, revealing broken, blackened teeth. Lice and beetles crawled from her pores and nostrils, from her anus and vagina, biting softly into the flesh of his own body. He would waken himself screaming.

## 2. LOVE

The woman lying naked on the sofa beside Karen Black was Celia Blomberg, aristocrat and arch-fascist. She was perusing a photostat copy of Entropy and the Third Law of Thermodynamics, by Professor Jedekiah Jesus.

"Celia..." Karen said in a pleading voice, running a finger up the inside of Celia's thigh. Celia put the book down and rolled over onto Karen's body. Her hand slid into Karen's crotch, her lips tenderly kissing her nipples. The key turned in the door to the apartment. Celia rolled off onto the floor as Johnny Terrier stepped into the room.

"Hello, loves," he said, casually stepping over Celia Blomberg's body.

"Don't let me bother you. Do carry on." He pulled off his leather gloves and vanished into the bedroom.

## 3. ICE

Johnny Terrier had been thrown over the back of a horse. As he began to regain consciousness he saw that he was looking down at deep snow. He moved his aching head slowly, and looked around him. He was in a convoy of six men, all rigged out in Siberian Cossack gear but armed with efficient modern weapons and wearing the colours of the Emperor Of Iceland.

The horses stopped. Johnny saw that they had reached the sea. Some of the men mumbled some words of Icelandic-Swedish, but Johnny couldn't catch what they were saying.

"They will be here soon," he said.

They settled there and waited.

## 4. AUTUMN LEAVES

"It'll be born in the spring."

"That figures." Steve Mitchell and Karen Black were lying in the huge four-poster bed once occupied by the King of Germany, many centuries ago. They had been making hectic love; he had caused her considerable pain.

Steve was thinking about the old man they had met in the Reichstag grounds.

"You know," he said, "Schickleguber's already had his innings. But that old boy hadn't even heard of him."

"I don't care a damn about Schickleguber," she growled, turning over.

Steve lit a Russian Sobranie cigarette. "I don't think that guy *does* exist. I think he's a ghost. Come to think of it, he did strike me as somewhat resembling Bismark."

"Oh Christ." She got up from the bed and washed.

"That'd make us — as far as we know — the only people in the world. But perhaps, like you say, we're ghosts too..."

Karen, dressing, pointed to her stomach, "Don't forget the ghost of our unborn child." She sounded angry.

Steve brushed a tear from his eye. "The world's inhabited entirely by ghosts," he cried. "We're all bloody ghosts. Not a material being amongst us."

She pulled on her boots and walked out through the door. Steve watched her from the window. She crossed the courtyard and went into the gardens of the Reichstag. He watched as she met the old man, and passed him.

Then Steve turned away from the window and wondered.

Dead autumn leaves blew around outside.

## 5. CHAOS

Captain Terrier was feeling better. He lay in his bunk reading a magazine, as soft music was piped into his cabin from the Ballroom, which by now was completely cleaned of spiders and disinfected.

As Terrier turned a page he heard a sound in the distance which at first refused to register. Then, realization dawned. The noise was the sound of machine gun fire, and it was still going on. He leaped out of bed and pulled on a pair of shorts, then rummaged through his carpetbag to find the .38 Smith & Wesson revolver which he always carried. He checked to see that the gun was loaded, then dashed from the cabin. The corridor outside was full of panicking people running to and fro, screaming and yelling. Arms and legs were everywhere; the respectable aristocrats had gone berserk.

Captain Terrier pushed his way through the stampeding crowd, making for the main lounge, whence the firing seemed to be coming. As he pounded up a spiral staircase to C deck, on which the lounge was positioned, there was a tremendous, thundering sound, followed by screams of blind terror as the airship capsized to the starboard side. Terrier watched as the people below him fell into a heap on the starboard of the ship, making a huge mound of bodies in which many were crushed and asphyxiated. Running, Terrier reached C deck.

As he climbed out from the stairwell into the main lounge, he saw that the ship's officers had cornered a group of Indians, and bullets were whizzing through the air. Terrier, unseen by anyone else, positioned himself behind a chair and began firing at the Indians.

He hit one with his first shot. The man rolled across the crazily tilting floor leaving a trail of blood.

The ship, Terrier observed with horror, was now losing height rapidly, and he thought immediately of the *Gladstone*. The trapped Indians must be anarchists, he thought, and killed another one.

Passengers in the lounge had fallen to the floor when the





shooting began. Now they were trying to crawl away from the crossfire as the ship plummeted earthwards. Terrier saw Stephanie Mitchell. She was almost at the exit, when she stood up and made a run for it. Terrier shouted at her to get down. It was too late. A bullet smashed into her back and she fell to the floor. Captain Terrier shot her killer.

The ship's officers shouted at him, "Get out while you can!" "No," he yelled back in a vengeful tone.

"Get out!" the captain shouted again.

"Get lost," Terrier killed another anarchist. He crouched into a ball as bullets vollied past his ears.

"Christ!" he exclaimed, poking his head out with caution when the bullets stopped. He thought of Caroline. She had been murdered by anarchists. Then he remembered the message she had given him. The anarchists were going to burn the Empire, raze it to the ground. Terrier was tearing himself apart to reach a decision.

He crawled down the stairs to an escape hatch, where he was helped into a parachute. Giving his gun to the young petty officer who was supervising the escape, he jumped. As he landed in the Indus, near Kohat, he saw the *Clive Of India* crash into the ground, and explode in a ball of fire.

He wept.

## 6. WAR

Winter 1919. An armoured train pulled by a dirty old steam engine drew into the marshalling yards, its whistle blowing. Almost before it had stopped, a man stepped from a carriage down onto the derelict wooden platform. A weathered sign was just legible on the office wall: KIEV MARSHALLING YARDS.

Surrounded by a heavy bodyguard, Count Lev Davidovich Bronstein moved down the long platform to where stood another group of heavily armed men dressed in Cossack gear. As Bronstein's band approached, the leader of these men stepped forward to greet the Count. Bronstein dismissed the offered hand with a wave of his gloved fist.

"Comrade Makhno," he began, not looking at the leader of the great anarcho-bandit army which had liberated half of Russia from the Tsarist army.

"Comrade Makhno, on behalf of our friend in Petrograd, I would like to thank you for the hardy way in which you and your men have fought for our cause."

Nestor Makhno picked a fly from his teeth. Bronstein went on. "You have done much good to the revolution in this part of Russia, your Ukraine. We see that certain White bands are still holding out in this area, however. They must be dealt with immediately."

Makhno snarled. Bronstein continued, "Also, we desire that you join your army with ours; of course, you shall have to change your ideas - your dreams - radically to unite with the great Bolsheviks. Consider my words, Nestor Makhno."

Makhno growled, "Consider my words," Bronstein repeated, turning and walking away, back to his armoured train. Makhno's troop vanished across the deserted yard.

## 7. MORALS

"Always, there must be morals."

"But our movement is not based on morals!"

"Of course it is. They are just different morals, that's all." In her rage, Emma Goldmann grabbed the Schmeisser and cut Frederick Engels to ribbons.

## 8. MURDER

Nestor Makhno led his mounted army of anarcho-bandits into the deserted streets of Kiev. He heard no sound of an army in the city.

"It's empty," one of his men said. "No-one's here."

Makhno made no comment, continuing to look about him suspiciously.

"Perhaps they're out on a reconnaissance mission," he proposed. One of those behind him snorted.

"Well let's look around." He split the company up into four parts and they searched each part of the city, north, south, east and west.

Nestor Makhno and ten others searched the northern sector. At one point they thought they saw a figure watching them, but whatever it was vanished instantly. Despatching one man to investigate, Makhno led his men onward through the streets of Kiev. After an hour, they were found back in the centre of the city. They stood around for a while in the cold winter air, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands. Then, there came the sound of horses' hooves on the cobbles. It was the rest of Makhno's men. As they all arrived, Makhno led them into an empty tavern, wherein they helped themselves to fresh, clear ale. Most of the men indulged in joking and singing, whilst Makhno and his chief captains debated their position. Eventually the leaders went out into the silent city.

"It is worrying," Makhno said. "It is too quiet, much too quiet." "Well," said one of his officers, "there is nought we can do, so I suggest that we make camp. The sky grows darker and I am myself tired."

"Ay," said another, "let us rest."

Makhno agreed. "We will occupy the rooms in this tavern. Ilyitch, go inform the men, and set the guard." Ilyitch, a Cossack-garbed character sporting a heavy sabre, went into the tavern.

It was midnight. Makhno was dozing, half asleep, in an armchair beside a flickering fire. He started, believing that he had heard a noise outside. Sitting up, he was aware of stealthy footsteps in the street outside. He got up and peered through a crack in the curtains, and saw dark figures assembling in the moonlit street. Quietly he roused his fellows; eight there were in the room. They all quickly armed themselves and prepared for a battle.

Suddenly, gunshots rang out from the room next to them. Makhno saw someone on the street fall. The firing was returned, then the night was broken by the sound of a pitch battle. Men were in the buildings opposite, and some were attempting to force an entry into the tavern. It was obviously a trap; these Tsarist forces had obviously been lying in wait since before the anarcho-bandits had entered the city. Makhno was torn with fury that he had allowed his army to fall into such a trap. He swung his machine gun wildly into the cold air. Where were they? A rifle shot answered his question. He staggered back, clutching his chest. Warm blood ran through his fingers, and he dropped and knew no more.

Through a swirling mist, shapes began to form in Makhno's head. He imagined himself to be seeing things, but the images grew more solid by the second, until he realized that before him stood Count Lev Davidovich Bronstein.

"Count. . ." Makhno found it difficult to speak.

"Count. . . have you saved us? Have you destroyed. . . the Whites?"

Bronstein and his men laughed. Someone poured some ale over Makhno's body, and they left him to die.

They rode out of town the next day.

#### THE ENGLISHMAN'S LADY ( INTERLUDE)

*They played tennis, dressed in pure white. The steady thud of the ball against racquet did not drown the motorway noise.*



This story is very loosely based on Ravan Christchild's forthcoming novel, *The Englishman's Lady*. Certain themes and plots in this story will be investigated in the next story, *The Machine At Cheviot Close H.Q.*

# "SCI-FI, SWORD-AND-SORCERY"

An interview with James Cawthorn, SF artist, illustrator & writer

by Eric Sutton





Jim Cawthorn's work includes black and white illustrations for *New Worlds* since the early 1960's, colour cover illustrations for Mike Moorcock's *The Runestaff*, *The Sword Of The Dawn*, *The Jewel In The Skull* and *The Mad God's Amulet* (published by White Lion). He collaborated with Mike Moorcock on the script for Amicus Productions' film of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *The Land That Time Forgot*. He also prepared stagewear and a backdrop for Hawkwind's stage act. He is currently working on a large format comic strip version of *The Runestaff* for Orbit Books, similar to *Stormbringer* which was published recently by Orbit. He is also preparing illustrations for L. Sprague de Camp's *The Tritonian Ring* to be published by the Owlswick Press of Arlington, Va.

*Tell us about your past...*

We used to have to learn how to eat a meal one-handed because the other hand was always pinning down a book. It was a typical working-class home – every room had to double as a bedroom, but where books could be fitted in, they were. I remember the *Golden Wonder* book which sold before the War (I was nine years old when the war started), and the stories I remember are nearly always fantasy, the supernatural or science fiction. My father read fantasy, too, so he had a sympathetic attitude towards it in the house, unlike some kid's parents.

You didn't have the money to buy adventure magazines but the library was quite good in that line. There couldn't have been many houses where I lived in Gateshead that actually had a bookcase. Mostly, a 'book' meant a magazine. Most kids I knew, when they got beyond the stage of reading comics, read very little apart from the newspapers. I have friends who I don't think ever read the printed word at all, outside the papers. But I once found in their home the Penguin edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the only book I ever saw there. I still don't know if any of them ever managed to read all the way through it.

I got along quite well at school till the Army came along early in the war and took over the buildings. Then we had to go to school in spare rooms in other people's houses. The Army made a total mess of the buildings, spinning Bren-gun carriers on their tracks in the middle of paths, knocking gateposts off, and other typical military things.

For my first job I worked in a cinema projection box. The film showing was *Hangmen Also Die*, with Brian Donlevy, about the killing of Reinhardt Heydrich, the Gauleiter of Czechoslovakia. I'd been wanting to see this, but I never got more than quick glimpses of it from the box window. After three days, I left!

As for the start of my interest in swords-and-sorcery, I remember reading *Beowulf*, where a chieftain called Hrothgar and his band of warriors live in a hall beside a lake. In the lake lives a monster, Grendel, and his mother. In the drawings it appears vaguely humanoid, but it's enormous and covered in

scales and has claws. It comes out of the lake, breaks into the hall and carries off the sleeping warriors. This goes on for several nights and nobody can stand against it. Then along comes Beowulf. They have this terrific struggle in the hall and Beowulf pursues the monster back to the lake and tears its arm off. Grendel dies, but later Beowulf has to kill Grendel's mother, who's even more fearsome; even in those days mother was not to be trifled with. Around 1958 Mike Moorcock and me tried to sell a *Beowulf* strip story, with no luck. *Marvel* have done one recently, I believe.

I've always drawn, as far back as I can remember. I found that people were often fascinated by the ability to draw and regarded it as a mysterious thing. I worked with a fellow who ran a local combo (they weren't called groups then) and when he wanted decoration put round the drum I painted figures on it – that sort of stuff. On National Service in the RAF I sold occasional drawings. People used to bring photographs of their families, the older fellows especially would bring pictures of their kids, from which you could do portraits with pen and coloured inks. Even in those days they'd also want designs painted on singlets, usually pictures of Betty Grable, again in coloured inks. This idea that decorated tee shirts are modern is out – in my experience it goes back as far as 1949. It was against regulations, of course, but they got away with it.

Sometime in the 1950's I sent some drawings to D.C. Thomson's, the comics publishers in Dundee, my first real try at selling. They were rejected, which I don't wonder at now; they weren't of professional standard.

My father was always in work, he was one of the lucky ones. My mother had been brought up in the hard school of being elder sister in a large family, the daughter of a miner. It made a good combination for life in the Depression – my father always made sure the money was there, and she knew how to budget it, so we never knew poverty, though the area in which I grew up was poor enough.

### *Is Science Fiction for Escapist Readers?*

Maybe I read science fiction as an escape, but to me all literature is escapism, for it takes you away from your everyday life. It could be the most morbid fiction you could imagine, but it's still taking you away. I think that when people say SF is escapism, what they mean is that it's fantastic. Of course, some SF readers are obviously in retreat from life. In America you had whole hordes of people who literally wished they 'could find a good book to live in', specifically Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*. They took to it in droves, its history, customs, languages; it was so much nicer than living in the real world. They wanted to stay inside it. Also Frank Herbert's *Dune*. That became a cult, and I'm sure the reason is this: it created an entire, fictional world in which you could submerge yourself – you didn't have to come out unless you were forced to. Most of these cultists are of an age when they should be exploring what's actually going on in the world, building up their own futures, and it makes you wonder what pressures they're under. Maybe the real world over there is so off-putting that they can't stand it. That's real escapism and sounds like a case for a psychoanalyst. I agree that escapism does have a specialised meaning in that case, because these people really are trying to get away; they're not reading just for amusement, but because they don't like their lives. They want something else. *Dune* and *The Lord Of The Rings* also have all of the back-to-nature,



ecological trappings, which can't have done their sales any harm.

### *Which art college did you go to?*

I never had any formal art training, so whatever ideas are put into you in art college, I didn't receive. I still wish that I'd had a grounding in the basic skills of drawing, perspective, composition, and so forth. I feel happier working with fantasy than with straight SF, but I try not to analyse my likes and dislikes too much. I think there's a danger in becoming too conscious of the psychological reasons behind what you're doing; it gets between you and your imagination. Mike Moorcock told me once about overhearing someone at an SF Convention who was explaining to another writer what the psychological sources of that writer's material were, and it seemed like the greatest possible harm that could be done to any creative artist.

An illustrator who may be very good at ordinary subjects may simply have no feeling for fantasy, no understanding of the themes that are constant in SF. On the other hand you may get an artist who's technically inferior but who does have the required kind of outlook, who can get a response out of you, a tremendous one, perhaps. He knows what SF is about, he feels it, and the reader responds to his work. Now I'm fortunate in that a lot of people appear to respond to what I draw, although I'm technically weak in some respects. But I'm told that people get an emotional kick from my artwork, and that's what seems to be wanted in fantasy and SF.

### *What is Science Fiction?*

Readers have never been able to define SF. They've been trying for years, although I can't see why. Various publishers, not so much nowadays but at one time, shied away from the label. They thought it not quite respectable, or as immature and sensationalist. If they got a writer like the philosopher, Olaf Stapledon, they'd put his work out as a mainstream novel. Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* were SF, but I bet that you wouldn't have found a publisher at the time they were written who would have called them that. Many critics say this was due to the fact that SF in the specialized magazines was often associated with lurid covers and poor writing, which gave the whole category a bad name. A large part of the trouble was due to intellectual snobbishness, too. This attitude is no longer common — most publishers are only too glad to put out books under the label of SF. Some mainstream authors, when they found SF was beginning to sell, tried to leap into it themselves with no idea of what the medium entailed. They looked at it from the outside and said: "God, you can get away with anything in this type of story!"

As for pulp literature, I like it. You see, it's a sort of . . . it has a sort of nostalgia for me, even though I wasn't old enough to be reading it during the early 'thirties when it was in full flood. I like the whole tradition of garish covers, thick pulp pages with untrimmed edges . . . I wish the situation still existed. At its peak two hundred titles a month went on the bookstands — Westerns, Romances, Historical, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Flying Stories. There was even a magazine called *Zeppelin Stories*, which shows you how specialised the market could get. Writers worked under a tight discipline. The best learned that they could produce very good stuff while working to a

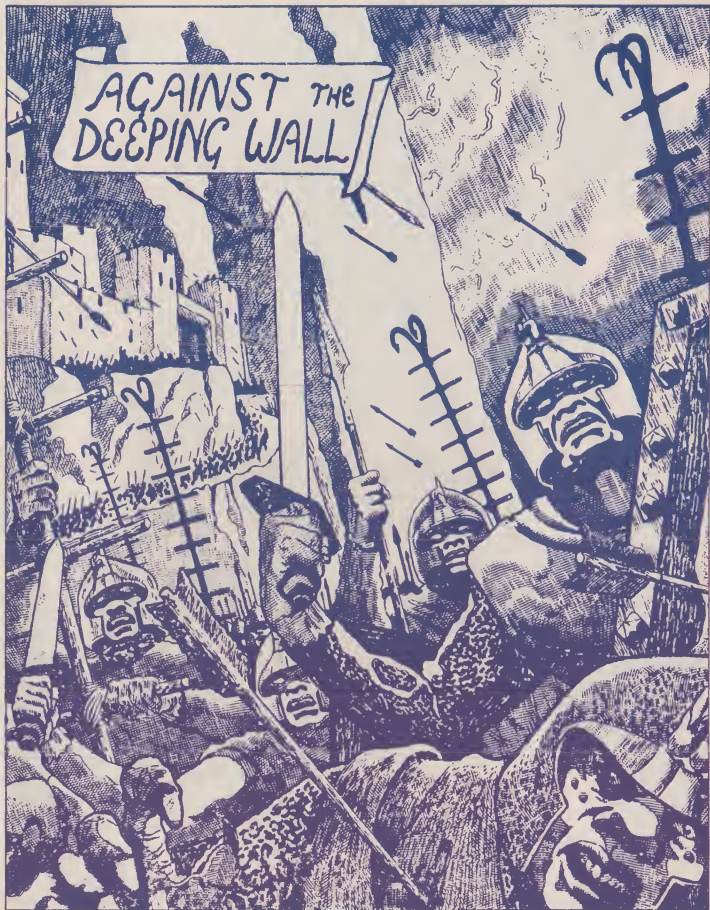


tight schedule and under the moral and political restrictions imposed on them by the social conditions of their time. Because don't forget that this was during the Depression when people wanted what you call escapist literature. You had to be a prolific writer, also. And the pulps accepted things which more respectable magazines wouldn't touch, among them SF and some types of horror and fantasy.

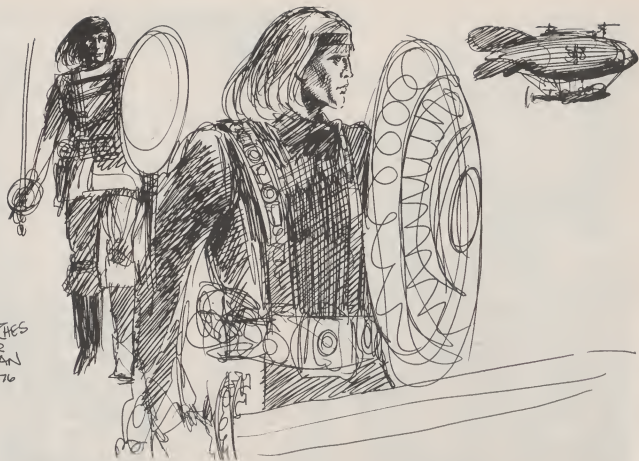
All this is nowadays reprinted in hardcover and paperback, whole anthologies have been composed using the cream of the SF written during a few brief years. Then along came television. *Cannon* is a perfect example of how television has replaced the pulps, at any rate in their more routine form. It has yet to produce an equivalent of such authors as Raymond Chandler, probably the most outstanding graduate from *Black Mask* into the world of the hardcover thriller. Tight plotting and fast action were all-important in the pulp world. It was good discipline for a writer and gave him a good foundation from which to branch out later if he wanted to. And of course illustrations were a strong selling-point, especially the covers, in a competitive field.

### *What kind of fiction do you like to work with most of all?*

I like stories which really grip my imagination, visually, and try to translate them into terms of pictures — so authors like Mike Moorcock, Edgar Rice Burroughs, William Hope Hodgson, inspire me. They have to create an emotional mood in the



SKETCHES  
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SJOAN  
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reader and they do this by the use of vivid, incredible images. If you have any imagination at all, you have to respond to them and you want to express your response pictorially.

These illustrations here, most of them are roughs. A lot of them are quite old, going back to the early 'sixties. Some I did when Mike was writing a novel and discussing the ideas with me, which he did quite often. I'd do drawings based upon characters from the novel, but illustrating incidents which I'd invented myself though set in the world he'd created. He used to get feedback from the illustrations, and this would eventually affect the novel in various ways. He has a very strong visual sense, which is why when he worked for IPC he was one of their better strip-writers. It was necessary there to work closely with the artists as part of a team.

Sometimes it happens that a story I have to illustrate is dull and then I have to synthetically create excitement in the illustration which isn't really present in the text. It's a form of cheating which most commercial artists practise at some time, because above all you've got to attract the reader's eye, make him look. I suppose the supreme con-artists in this field are the cinema-poster designers.

#### *What satisfaction do you get from your artwork?*

I often get a sense of achievement out of what I do. Especially if I feel I've drawn something which gets close to the image in my imagination. An artist sees a vision in his head and has to transfer it onto paper, but somewhere in between something always goes missing. There are certain things which you have

to exaggerate in order to get the emotional effect across to the reader. I find that if I'm tremendously involved in an illustration, I will bring in these exaggerations naturally, because I'm being driven by intense emotions and so what I'm doing must reflect that; it can't help but do so. It's not watered down except by sheer lack of technical ability to express what I feel. True, the medium itself is bound to influence the result. Black and white, for example, is my favourite medium, but obviously it's not adequate to convey everything. Some artists work almost entirely in colour – it's usually more profitable – but I find that you can get a lot more out of black and white than many people think. I still feel, though, that a professional illustrator shouldn't confine himself too narrowly, he needs to be at least competent in the use of colour, even if he never gets beyond that level.

#### *Why is there so little humour in SF?*

Science fiction is a literature of ideas, so I've heard. And remember it's full of sceptics as well as optimists and they're quite as likely to deal with the drawbacks of having, say, super-human powers as with the advantages. SF writers have always found new plots by reversing old ones. Given a super intelligence you may be able to run your life more efficiently, help everybody, set right the ills of mankind; on the other hand, Superman is more likely to be stoned to death, burned, hung or drowned as a warlock.

Science fiction has always been easy to send up, of course. For example, authors always assumed that Earthwomen were





irresistible to alien invaders, whatever the shape, size or colour of the aliens. Beings with eighteen tentacles, leathery skins and three purple eyes would devastate whole cities just to grab a shipload of naked ladies.

But it's not true to say SF is humourless. There's this character of Henry Kuttner's, for example, called Galloway Gallagher who's a send-up of the typical SF hero. Gallagher could only work when he was drunk – his subconscious mind would then invent all kinds of incredible things. He was bright when sober, but drunk he was a genius. People would pay him to solve their problems, then come running after him saying: "Where's this? Where's that? We paid you so many million dollars for it in advance!" And he'd then have to sit down and figure out what the machine was for that he'd built when he was drunk. He often found that he'd incorporated the solutions to three people's problems in one machine.

Alcohol was a strong feature of most of Kuttner's stories. But generally speaking you couldn't have drunken heroes in the pulp magazines because they were under a strict form of censorship. Villains could get drunk and fall about, that was all right, but the hero had to be clean-limbed and sober. Also, a lot of the heroes of SF were engineers and professors, who were supposed to be above that sort of thing. They were more concerned with explaining to the reader in great detail how they were going to make the jump from what was then scientifically possible, to the device they proposed to build to get them to the other end of the Galaxy. Galloway Gallagher was a kind of inadvertent Mad Scientist.

*Tell us about any problems you're having with current work.*

The story I'm illustrating at the moment is about a man trying to do his best in an impossible situation and finding in the end that all he's succeeded in doing is destroying everything he's tried to save. Obviously there's a heavily tragic mood to it. So what I have to try to do is make the reader get that feeling of a dark quality of doom overhanging all. Even before he knows what the story is, he has to get the feeling from the illustrations. This is a comparatively easy thing to do, in my terms, because I work so often with downbeat themes in fantasy. Besides, I like that sort of situation. A story in which everybody gets destroyed – I really enjoy that!

Of course, the subject I like best is people's faces – their expressions, their eyes – something on which many SF artists are weak. Drawing the human figure and face isn't all that important in SF, though. What you generally have to create is a feeling of exoticness. But to me the figure in movement is the greatest subject in the world – the face and the body, rather than fantastic backgrounds and settings.

*What about sex and SF?*

People have said about my work, there's a strong sexual element in it. Not so much openly expressed as implied, which is probably why I'm attracted to Swords-and-Sorcery. S&S largely involves physically perfect people, naked or semi-naked (quote: "save for a loincloth": unquote), always moving against exotic backdrops, running, jumping, fighting, expressing their physical ability in the most violent and colourful sense. For me, it's a perfect subject.

There was a great deal of eroticism in the work of Edgar Rice

Burroughs, though because of the time at which he wrote it was largely implicit rather than explicit. If you have ever read his first published novel, *A Princess Of Mars*, it is there from beginning to end, sometimes very powerfully, and quite possibly unconsciously. Later writers such as Howard carried it further out into the open, within the limits of the magazine market. One of the most obvious things about S&S, which has been analysed by many people, is that it's full of leather, buckles, furs, straps, swords, jewels, all the trappings of the standard erotic story. When you get writers cashing in on it's sudden popularity by including overt sex, they kill the whole motive power of this type of fiction. It's the fact that the sex element is more or less submerged that drives the story forward. Modern film-makers have almost destroyed the classic horror subjects, such as vampirism, by misusing their freedom to be very explicit in what they put on the screen.

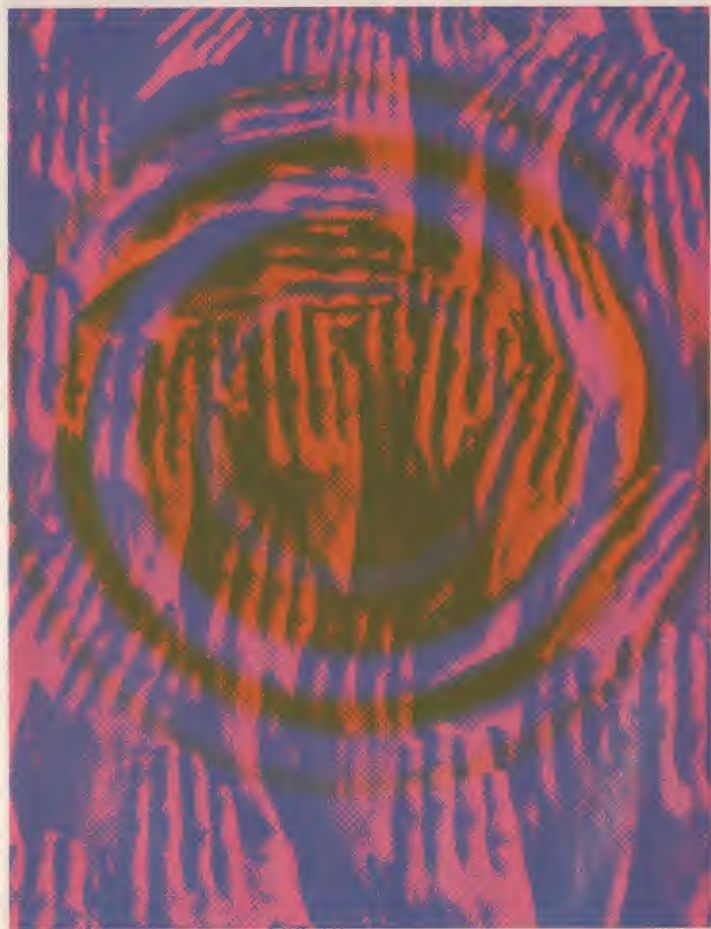
Of course, writers and critics often stress heavily the fact that the hero of an S&S story is always sticking a sword into people, implying that this is in imitation of the sex act. I'd like to point out that some of the funniest of these send-ups are written by devoted S&S fans, who are quite capable of seeing their favourite fiction from an outsider's point of view. The anti-Freudian argument is that the sword was extremely well-designed for killing people at close range, and what the hero had on his mind when skewering his enemies was self-preservation rather than fertilization. If you read the history of the sword, you'll find that it is often associated with the nobility and the rich. Wearing a sword implied prestige, power, wealth, and meant that you were a man of some consequence.

Plate armour, devised as protection against swords, had a similar meaning. Ordinary men couldn't have afforded it and in any case wouldn't have been allowed to wear it, by their lords and masters. They would have been stamped on pretty quickly for getting ideas above their social station. So all these things have an economic as well as a sexual significance, but ever since Freud, the other reason – the perfectly practical reason – for carrying a sword gets shoved aside. That's if you can kill people practical.

As an artist I like fantasy best, because it can get nearest to the motivations from which people's daydreams and wishes spring. You can get closer to the roots than you can with SF. You can take the images which spring from the unconscious, and with very little alteration turn them into actual characters in fantasy. Jimmy Ballard talks of using landscapes to express the internal state of someone's mind or emotions, and fantasy is the perfect medium for this. To take an obvious, rather crude example, you can have a wild, Gothic sort of landscape which expresses the turmoil and the dark subconscious forces working in the hero's mind. You refine it from there until you get down to specific aspects of someone's personality. This is what I like to work with, but fantasy has only recently become really respectable in commercial terms – at least, outside of the field of children's literature. SF was a ghetto literature at one time, but S&S was despised even by SF fans!

But now the S&S thing has become big business, which is a totally incredible situation to somebody like me who has read it for, I suppose, almost thirty years. From a minority taste, it's suddenly all over the bookshops. Whole new series, some of them as good as any of the old 'classics', but others just mediocre rip-offs of Howard or Burroughs, are appearing constantly. And they can't reprint the old favourites fast enough. From my point of view it's a perfect situation, and I often wonder just how long it can last.





# The Touch of a Vanished Hand

by Robert Holdstock

Thank God for Gable's hands.

\*

A blind man once wrote that in the holding of hands there is an awareness of self existence. The blind man's name was Andre Goriot and he lived in exile on the seventh world of Sirius.

I set down on Sirius 7 in my youth and found the blind man in his self-contained installation, a small, almost featureless construct, set well in at the base of a cliff. He held my hands and talked of what he had learned about perception and isolation. I was bored and tried to keep my mumblings inaudible, but at the time my throat recorder was new to me and an irritating static sent tingling fingers of skin sensation down my chest. Concentration was difficult to maintain. The blind man was just so much boredom, suffered by my adolescent self only because what he told me would be of use in my level one dissertation.

He held my hands for all the time I was with him and I never recovered from the intimacy of the contact. The very touch of a man's hands thereafter made me shiver and recoil. I wore gloves perpetually, and doggedly declined to shake hands in greeting or at an introduction.

It became so unnerving, the physical revulsion to a hand's touch that I underwent corrective psychotherapy. It was not a recourse to which I referred myself willingly. The effect of deep space upon fairly ordinary psychoses has been the subject of thousands of level two and three dissertations. And still the surface has been no more than scratched. An unexpected linkage in my brain resulted in an essentially simple piece of corrective therapy having an effect on my sexuality. Essentially, my drives reversed.

I had no regrets. Why should I have had? With my new motivations and interests I was content; as content as I had been with my old.

\*

Later there was a man called Christoper Gable who had never heard of Goriot. I met him over dinner at the status-B Eurasian club, of which I was a member on nineteen mapspace worlds. Gable had travelled much. In the lines on his face I read of great

loss. In the way he talked I saw a certain lacking of identity. Perhaps the two things were related, but I never found out.

Gable was middle-aged and his blonde hair was cut above his ears in a very conservative style. He towered over me in height, and yet his clothes hung loose and creased upon his frame, and when he walked he seemed ill at ease with motion.

When I mentioned Northern Europe he was immediately interested and confirmed that he came from Sweden, although that had been more than a decade in his past. I saw, then, the Scandinavian lilt to his interling. He had already noticed the unshakeable American accent in my own voice, and I spent a while telling him of my brief and pointless participation in the Chino-American war of '78. I had been made prisoner near the beginning of the fracas and had been interned in a small camp that stretched below the ruins of the Bridge Monument in a part of the prison city that had been San Francisco. My Anglo-French status had been denied me, despite my shouting (they weren't prepared to believe that a European would have volunteered so quickly to come into the war: since we only have to do three months military service I thought to get mine over with as quickly as possible. Surely the first three months of a war is safe enough? I didn't understand war) and I had been branded as a North American and interned with several locals who taught me much of American cynicism. We made gravity nets by the waters edge, and some of them chose to drown, but most of us dreamed of far away worlds, and the freedom of space.

That had been a long time in the past, and the hurt and frustration of those sordid years in confinement had long since passed away.

We turned the conversation towards the arts, and towards the scientific arts, and found a common interest in holospans and mobiloforms. Returning to his apartment that same evening I was astonished at the array of original art forms he possessed. Many had been executed by his own hand. The walls were covered with mobiloforms, mostly reconstructions of his earlier life; I saw people and places that fired my imagination, all moving through their ten second cycles with never tiring repetitiveness.

Over the days our friendship developed and we began to

shirk work to be together, to talk over common ground and enjoy the emotions and pleasures of each others company.

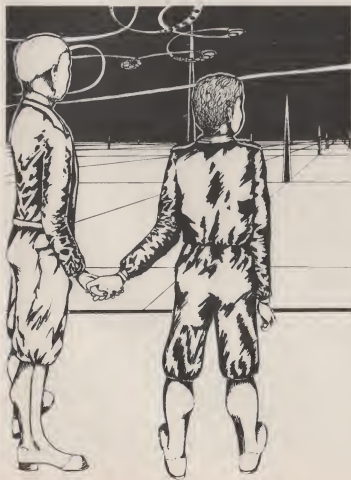
Over the weeks our relationship developed into something more than friendship, and the essential absence of women in the city became an irrelevancy, and Gable wondered why he had ever brooded and pined for female companionship. There was nothing we wanted or desired that we could not both supply for each other.

All this was on Rigel Nine, an oxygen-nitrogen world, so distant from its primary that the sky was never blue in any terran sense, and the surface was always cold. The underground city of Voronezh basked in homeostasis, but shuddered too often for our likings to the cracking and movement of the Niner's crust as it moved before forces within our comprehension but beyond our capability to control.

\*

The time comes to leave Rigel Nine and we go out onto the surface. The landscape of the planet has been terraformed in as much as it has been flattened. We gaze at miles of flatness, the granite-like rocks ground to sand which has blown away. The deep blue sky is star speckled, as it always is. Immensely tall conoids reach into the sky at regular intervals, black in colour, splitting the wind into confused patterns of flow. These are the power houses of Voronezh and they harness the powers of wind and sun.

The roadways wind between the towers and we walk along one to where another intersects. A hundred yards away, small and opaquely white, is the landing and despatching block; we step upon it and reach out to hold hands.



This is the way of travel and there is nothing particularly intimate in the touch. Our suits coded for our destination, the block transmits us through space in extended seconds. As we move to our goal, the third world of Bianco's Star, we feel the passage of suns and worlds and spread thin to conserve our identity. It is a sensation of disembodiment, time slows, and I know little save the touch of Gable's hands upon my own, and the excitement of our next few months together. The cerebro-tactile linkage keeps us in contact and we travel through the void as a unit. Until.

I come out of space on the third world of Bianco's star on the heat seared equator of the world; I stand upon the cool, white landing block and the gaping maw of a subterranean tunnel opens wide so I might move into the equable temperature of the terran installation below.

I feel Gable's hands clasping my own and turn to him without thinking that I should be seeing him, without realising that the grasp should have ceased to be as we landed and separated. . . as we appear to have done.

Gable holds my hands and he is nowhere to be seen. I have a feeling that I shall never see him again, and as I go below, shocked and weak, I know — because I have heard of these things happening before — that he has been lost and will remain lost forever.

\*

We had come to Bianco's Star to offer our artistic talents to the major art industry of the world, crystal sculpture. I sat in my small apartment for many days, harnessed to the projection headpiece, shattering a seven pound crystal in carefully directed ways, and producing nothing. My thoughts were cloudy, my emotions unpredictable but predominantly blue. The crystal lost weight, the dust filled the air, the shape changed from linear to abstract, to various meaningless forms, to a perfect feather that found some small number of admirers and earned me the credit-status to move to Earth.

Gable's touch was on my hands all the time, and I never knew if he was with me in awareness or not.

\*

On Earth I revisited England and found peace of mind, for a while, in the roaring city of London. I hid away in Highgate, in a shack built of red brick and ordinary steel, that stood below the great Northern Flyover. The whole region was a shanty town, a lake of ruins, fire blackened houses and cracked tarmac-adam roadways. The City rose five hundred storeys above the ancient Thames and at night the lights from those roaring megaliths made the shanty town a jungle of harsh concreted walls, and intense shadows.

This was all a vision of San Francisco, a curious reflection and reconstruction of my fears and frustrations in the months following my release from internment. I relived in agonising dreams and extended periods of unshakeable reminiscence, the exhausting trek across the continent of America, following the straggling columns of Americans all searching their homes and families. And I, with an ocean separating me from my own security, living in dread of death before I could touch the land at Cobb, or Plymouth.

The feeling of wrongness within the city grew, and with each passing day I became more uncomfortable. I talked to virtually no-one and lived a hermitic existence, eking out my resources as much as was possible. I became more and more thankful for the continual pressure of Gables hands upon my own, but attempts

to communicate with him failed.

After three weeks in London I could take the isolation no longer, and travelled to Sweden where I found Gable's birthplace. I traced his life through school and three cities, through a broken marriage and a finished career: he had taught emotive art at the University of Upsala, but his drug commitments and adolescent behaviour (he had created obscene designs out of the vane booths on the university campus) finished him as a lecturer. That had been in the early days of powerthought design, and Upsala had been the home of many of the earlier models of the projection apparatus that would later become almost a household possession. He had abused his privileged status and he had been sacked.

From the mobiloforms of Gable that I saw there, from the expression on his face, the spring in his step, I decided that the disasters of his early life had not particularly bothered him.

His wife had left him shortly before he would have thrown her out. Their contract was nearly expired anyway, and would not have been renewed because of artistic and culinary incompatibility, the most mundane of reasons for divorce in those days. Gable had moved to Stockholm and opened a breeding contract with a Norwegian 3-birther. I found his seventeen year old son living in the lake district of Jutland. He rode an air horse across the marshy ground of his inherited farm and dropped from the seat even before the sleek machine had stopped. He stared at me across a patch of reeds before turning to skim flattened pebbles across the still waters of the lake. I saw Gable in his hair, in his eyes, in the arrogance of his bearing.

"I was not greatly endeared to my father. Nor he to me."

His voice was Gable's voice. I wanted to listen to him talk for hours, but he fell silent.

"Why did your father leave? Why did he become so depressed?"

"Why?" He laughed. He kicked at some mechanism hidden in the reeds and his lake erupted into turbulence. He stripped off his clothes and walked to the water's edge. Gable in every way. I felt my stomach knot and suppressed the desire I felt. He stepped into the waves and shouted, "I was greater than him. In every way." He began to swim and he turned on his back and there was a smile of horrifying coldness upon his face. "I took his soul. I drained him. I became Him. . . and more."

The pressure on my hands increased. Was Gable listening? I squeezed the unseen hands and felt the despair of the trapped man. I wondered in what hell Gable was existing. Was his son interested in knowing his father's fate? Should I tell him?

Gable's son did not reappear. The turbulence of the lake died quite suddenly and I assumed that the youth had come ashore out of my sight. I sat by the waters edge and after a few hours the lake seemed to shrink and the freshness of the landscape became submerged in an aura of stagnation. I searched for the son and found only ruin. . . a ruined farmhouse, an overgrown road, a rusty air horse, unused for many years.

A sudden terrible fear came over me and I ran from the farm, screaming. But when I reached the mainway all was normal again.

In the darkness of the night train to Boulogne, confused and cold, I felt every finger's pressure on my own, imagined I could sense the ooze of sweat in Gable's palms, as he screamed in his emptiness, threshed and struggled to regain his material existence. I sobbed, felt sick.

Under the channel, with the red lights hypnotising me as the monorail glided silently through the submarine world. Then Dover, and the smell of the continent I had just left. In Dover,

by the hovercraft docks, I knew the pleasures of flesh, immersed myself in the body of a dockside bord, and slept the night dreaming of Gable. His hands clutched desperately at my own and I awoke several times during the night to find my arms outstretched and the fingers clenching and unclenching, the bisexual figure beside me watching in consternation.

There was a moment, some little while later, when I felt my hands touch warm, smooth flesh, and yet I sat alone on the platform of a monorail station, waiting to journey north.

I sat in the lounge of the station and closed my eyes, and it seemed my hands ran across the belly of a small but shapely woman, explored navel and pubis, and stroked the outside of her thighs for an interminable time. I sat in the dimmed light and stared at my palms, and I felt the fullness of a breast, and my finger tips touched the hard button of a nipple and then wandered again in a drunkard's walk towards the feminine apex.

Opening my awareness to the station I found it in ruins, the rails warped and useless, the station tumbledown and filled with the litter of ages, cans and the bodies of air cars. The viscera of a nation, decaying through time.

Leaving Earth, with its frightening transmutations, I jumped to Mars, but found I could not land. I moved on, dispersing through space in the direction of Centaurus. Gable's grip played a bolero on each hand and I squeezed back, reassuring him, always reassuring him. I could not make contact at Centaurus and journeyed on, dispersing even more, and I noticed that the stars were thinning, and as I came in close to Sirius its glowing disc faded and became black, and Gable seemed to hesitate, as if aware of my shock.

The Universe about me was gone in a second and I recalled the events of a moment before, of standing at the platform on Rigel Nine, of holding hands with Gable, of jumping.

And the dream in that drawn out moment of time between worlds, the events and shock of Gable's loss, in fact, just a sublimation of my own failure to transmit correctly.

And now Gable, on a world somewhere, alive and dreaming every night of his past and his future, and feeling me gripping his hands as I drift through a curious non-existence wondering whether a day or a million years passes.

\*

Thank God for Gable's touch.

# The End of All Songs

CONTINUED

towards them, its engine shrieking, the water foaming white in its wake. Bastable made it turn, just before it struck the beach, and cut off the engine. 'Do you mind getting a bit wet? There are no scorpions about.'

They waded to the boat and pulled themselves aboard after dumping the hamper into the bottom. Mrs Underwood scanned the water. 'I had no idea creatures of that size existed ... Dinosaurs, perhaps, but not insects—I know they are not really insects, but ...'

'They won't survive,' said Captain Bastable as he brought the engine to life again. 'Eventually the fish will wipe them out. They're growing larger all the time, those fish. A million years will see quite a few changes in this creek.' He smiled. 'It's up to us to ensure we make none ourselves.' He pointed back at the water. 'We don't leave a trace of oil behind which isn't detected and cleaned up by one of our other machines.'

'And that is how you resist the Morpall Effect,' said Jherek.

'We don't use that name for it,' interjected Mrs Persson. 'But, yes—Time allows us to remain here as long as there are no permanent anachronisms. And that includes traces which might be detected by future investigators and prove anachronistic. It is why we were so eager to rescue that tin cup. All our equipment is of highly perishable material. It serves us, but would not survive in any form after about a century. Our existence is tentative—we could be hurled out of this age at any moment and find ourselves not only separated, perhaps forever, but in an environment incapable, even in its essentials, of supporting human life.'

'You run great risks, it seems,' said Mrs Underwood. 'Why?'

Mrs Persson laughed. 'One gets a taste for it. But, then, you know that yourself.'

The creek began to narrow, between lichen-covered banks, and at the far end a wooden jetty could be seen. There were two other boats moored beside it. Behind the jetty, in the shadow of thick foliage, was a dark mass, man-made.

A fair-haired youth, wearing a suit identical to those worn by Mrs Persson and Captain Bastable, took the mooring rope Mrs Persson flung to him. He nodded cheerfully to Jherek and Mrs Underwood as they jumped onto the jetty. 'Your friends are already inside,' he said.

The four of them walked over lichen-strewn rock towards the black, featureless walls ahead; these were tall and curved inward and had a warm, rubbery smell. Mrs Persson took off her helmet and shook out her short dark hair; she had a pleasant, boyish look. Her movements were graceful as she touched the wall in two places, making a section slide back to

admit them. They stepped inside.

There were several box-shaped buildings in the compound, some quite large. Mrs Persson led them towards the largest. There was little daylight, but a continuous strip of artificial lighting ran the entire circumference of the wall. The ground was covered in the same slightly yielding black material and Jherek had the impression that the entire camp could be folded in on itself within a few seconds and transported as a single unit. He imagined it as some large time-ship, for it bore certain resemblances to the machine in which he had originally travelled to the 19th century.

Captain Bastable stood to one side of the entrance, allowing first Mrs Persson and then Mrs Underwood to go in. Jherek was next. Here were panels of instruments, screens, winking indicators, all of the primitive, fascinating kind which Jherek associated with the remote past.

'It's perfect,' he said. 'You've made it blend so well with the environment.'

'Thank you.' Mrs Persson's smile was for herself. 'The Guild stores all its information here. We can also detect the movements of time-vessels along the megaflo, as it's sometimes termed. We did not, incidentally, detect yours. Instead there was a sort of rupture, quickly healed. You did not come in a ship?'

'Yes. It's somewhere on the beach where we left it, I think.'

'We haven't found it.'

Captain Bastable unzipped his overalls. Underneath them he wore a simple grey military uniform. 'Perhaps it was on automatic return,' he suggested. 'Or, if it was malfunctioning, it could have continued on, moving at random, and be anywhere by now.'

'The machine was working badly,' Mrs Underwood informed him. 'We should not, for instance, be here at all. I would be more than grateful, Captain Bastable, if you could find some means of returning us—at least myself—to the 19th century.'

'That wouldn't be difficult,' he said, 'but whether you'd stay there or not is another matter. Once a time traveller, always a time traveller, you know. It's our fate, isn't it?'

'I had no idea ...'

Mrs Persson put a hand on Mrs Underwood's shoulder. 'There are some of us who find it easier to remain in certain ages than others—and there are ages, closer to the beginnings or the ends of Time, which rarely reject those who wish to settle. Genes, I gather, have a little to do with it. But that is Jagged's speciality and he has doubtless bored you as much as he has bored us with his speculations.'

'Never!' Jherek was eager.

Mrs Persson pursed her lips. 'Perhaps you would care for some coffee,' she said.

Jherek turned to Mrs Underwood. He knew she would be pleased. 'Isn't that splendid, dear Mrs Underwood? They have a stall here. Now you must really feel at home!'

6

## Discussions and Decisions

Captain Mubbers and his men were sitting in a line on a kind of padded bench; they were cross-legged and tried to hide their knees and elbows, exposed since they had destroyed their pyjamas; all were blushing a peculiar plum colour and averted their eyes when the party containing Mrs Persson and Mrs Underwood entered the room. Inspector Springer sat by himself in a sort of globular chair which brought his knees close to his face; he tried to sip from a paper cup, tried to rise when the ladies came in, succeeded in spilling the coffee on his serge trousers; his grumble was half protest, half apology; he subsided again. Captain Bastable approached a black machine, marked with letters of the alphabet. 'Milk and sugar?' he asked Mrs Underwood.

'Thank you, Captain Bastable.'

'Mr Carnelian?' Captain Bastable pressed certain of the letters. 'For you?'

'I'll have the same, please.' Jherek looked around the small relaxation room. 'It's not like the stalls they have in London, is it, Captain Bastable?'

'Stalls?'

'Mr Carnelian means coffee stalls,' explained Mrs Underwood. 'I think it's his only experience of drinking coffee, you see.'

'It is drunk elsewhere?'

'As is tea,' she said.

'How crude it is, my understanding of your subtle age.' He accepted a paper cup from Captain Bastable, who had already handed Mrs Underwood her own. He sipped conscientiously, expectantly.

Perhaps they noticed his expression of disappointment. 'Would you prefer tea, Mr Carnelian?' asked Mrs Persson. 'Or lemonade? Or soup?'

He shook his head, but the smile was weak. 'I'll forgo fresh experience for the moment. There are so many new impres-





sions to assimilate. Of course, I know that this must seem familiar and dull to you—but to me it is marvellous. The chase! The scorpions! And now these huts! He glanced towards the Lat. 'The other three are not, then, back yet?'

'The others . . . ?' Captain Bastable was puzzled.

'He means the ones the scorpions devoured,' Mrs Underwood began. 'He believes . . .'

'That they will be reconstituted!' Mrs Persson brightened. 'Of course. There is no death, as such, at the End of Time.' She said apologetically to Jherek: 'I am afraid we lack the necessary technology to restore the Lat to life, Mr Carnelian. Besides, we do not possess the skills. If Miss Brunner or one of her people were on duty during this term but, no, even then it would not be possible. You must regard your Lat as lost forever, I fear. As it is, you can take consolation that they have probably poisoned a few scorpions. Happily, there being so many scorpions, the balance of nature is not noticeably changed, and thus we retain our roots in the Lower Devonian.'

'Poor Captain Mubbers,' said Jherek. 'His ties so hard and is forever failing in his schemes. Perhaps we could arrange some charade or other—in which he is monumentally successful. It would do his morale so much good. Is there something he could steal, Captain Bastable? Or someone he could rape?'

'Not here, I'm afraid.' But Captain Bastable blushed as he controlled his voice, causing Mrs Persson to smile and say, 'We are not very well equipped for the amusement of space travellers, I regret, Mr Carnelian. But we shall try to get them back to their original age—your age as near to their ship as possible. They'll soon be pilaging and raping again with gusto!'

Captain Bastable cleared his throat. Mrs Underwood studied a cushion.

Mrs Persson said: 'I forgot myself. Captain Bastable, by the way, Mrs Underwood, is almost a contemporary of yours. He was from 1901. It is 1901, isn't it, Oswald?'

He nodded, fingering his cuff. 'Thereabouts.'

'What puzzles me, more than anything,' continued Mrs Persson, 'is how so many people arrived here at the same time. The heaviest traffic in my experience. And two parties without machines of any kind. What a shame we can't speak to the Lat.'

'We could, if we wished,' said Jherek. 'You know their language?'

'Simpler. I have a translation pill, still. I offered them before, but no one seemed interested. At the Café Royal. Do you remember, inspector?'

Inspector Springer was as sullen as Captain Mubbers. He seemed to have lost

interest in the conversation. Occasionally a peculiar, self-pitying grunt would escape his throat.

'I know the pills,' said Mrs Persson. 'Are they independent of your cities?'

'Oh, quite. I've used them everywhere. They undertake a specific kind of engineering, I gather, on those parts of the brain dealing with language. The pill itself contains all sorts of ingredients but entirely biological, I'm sure. See how well I speak your language!'

Mrs Persson turned her eyes upon the Lat. 'Could they give us any more information than Inspector Springer?'

'Probably not,' said Jherek. 'They were all ejected at about the same time.'

'I think we'll keep the pill, therefore, for emergencies.'

'Forgive me,' said Mrs Underwood, 'if I seem insistent, but I should like to know our chances of returning to our own period of history.'

'Very poor, in your own case, Mrs Underwood,' said Captain Bastable. 'I speak from experience. You have a choice—inhabit some period of your future, or "return" to a present which could be radically changed, virtually unrecognisable. Our instruments have been picking up all kinds of disruptions, fluctuations, random eddies on the megaflo which suggest that heavier than usual distortions and re-creations are occurring. The multiversal planes are moving into some sort of conjunction.'

'It's the Conjunction of the Million Spheres,' said Mrs Persson. 'You've heard of it?'

Jherek and Mrs Underwood shook their heads.

'There's a theory that the conjunction comes when too much random activity occurs in the multiverse. It suggests that the multiverse is, in fact, finite—that it can only sustain so many continua and when the maximum number of continua is attained, a complete re-organisation takes place. The multiverse puts its house in order, as it were.' Mrs Persson began to leave the room. 'Would you care to see some of our operations?'

Inspector Springer continued to sulk and the Lat were still far too embarrassed to move, so Amelia Underwood and Jherek Carnelian followed their hosts down a short connecting tunnel and into a room filled with particularly large screens on which brilliantly coloured display models shifted through three dimensions. The most remarkable was an eight-armed wheel, constantly altering its size and shape. A short, swarthy, bearded man sat at the console below this screen; occasionally he would extend a moody finger and make an adjustment.

'Good evening, Sergeant Glogauer,' Captain Bastable bent over the bearded man's shoulder and stared at the instru-

ments. 'Any changes?'

'Chronoflows three, four and six are showing considerable abnormal activity,' said the sergeant. 'It corresponds with Faustaff's information, but it contradicts his automatic-reconstitution theory. Look at number-five prong!' He pointed to the screen. 'And that's only measuring crude. We can't plot the paradox factors on this machine—not that there would be any point in trying, at the rate they're multiplying. That kind of proliferation is going on everywhere. It's a wonder we're not affected by it. Elsewhere, things are fairly quiescent at present, but there's a lot more activity than I'd like. I'd propose a general warning call—get every Guild member back to sphere, place and century of origin. That might help stabilisation. Unless it's got nothing at all to do with us.'

'It's too late to know,' said Mrs Persson. 'I still hold with the reaction theory on the Conjunction, but where it leaves us—how we'll be affected—is anyone's guess.' She shrugged and was cheerful. 'I suppose it helps to believe in reincarnation.'

'It's the sense of insecurity that I mind,' said Glogauer.

Jherek made a contribution. 'They're very pretty. It reminds me of some of the things the rotting cities still do.'

Mrs Persson turned back from where she was inspecting a screen. 'Your cities, Mr Carnelian, are almost as bewildering as Time itself.'

Jherek agreed. 'They are almost as old, I suppose.'

Captain Bastable was amused. 'It suggests that Time approaches senility. It's an attractive metaphor.'

'We can do without metaphors, I should have thought,' Sergeant Glogauer told him severely.

'It's all we have.' Captain Bastable permitted himself a small yawn. 'What would be the chances of getting Mrs Underwood and Mr Carnelian here back to the 19th century?'

'Standard line?'

Captain Bastable nodded.

'Almost zero, at present. If they didn't mind waiting . . .'

'We are anxious to leave,' Mrs Underwood spoke for them both.

'What about the End of Time?' Captain Bastable asked Glogauer.

'Indigenous? Point of departure?'

'More or less.'

The sergeant frowned, studying surrounding screens. 'Pretty good.'

'Would that suit you?' Captain Bastable turned to his guests.

'It was where we were heading for, originally,' Jherek said.

'Then we'll try to do that.'

'And Inspector Springer?' Mrs Underwood's conscience made her speak.

'And the Lat?'

'I think we'll try to deal with them separately—they arrived separately, after all.'

Una Persson rubbed her eyes. 'If there were any means of contacting Jagged, Oswald, We could confer.'

'There is every chance he has returned to the End of Time,' Jherek told her. 'I would willingly bear a message.'

'Yes,' she said, 'Perhaps we will do that. Very well. I suggest you sleep now, after you've had something to eat. We'll make the preparations. If everything goes properly, you should be able to leave by morning. I'll see what the power situation is like. We're a bit limited, of course. Essentially this is only an observation post and a liaison point for Guild members. We've very little spare equipment or energy. But we'll do what we can.'

Leaving the charting room, Captain Bastable offered Mrs Underwood his arm. She took it.

'I suppose this all seems a bit prosaic to you,' he said. 'After the wonders of the End of Time, I mean.'

'Scarcely that,' she murmured. 'But I do find it rather confusing. My life seemed so settled in Bromley, just a few months ago. The strain . . .'

'You are looking drawn, dear Amelia,' said Jherek from behind them. He was disturbed by Captain Bastable's attentions.

She ignored him. 'All this moving about in Time cannot be healthy,' she said. 'I admire anyone who can appear as phlegmatic as you, captain.'

'One becomes used to it, you know,' he patted the hand which enfolded his arm. 'But you are bearing up absolutely wonderfully, Mrs Underwood, if this is your first trip to the Palaeozoic.'

She was flattered. 'I have my consolations,' she said. 'My prayers and so on. And my Wheldrake. Are you familiar with the poems of Wheldrake, Captain Bastable?'

'When a boy, they were all I read. He can be very apt. I follow you.'

She lifted her head and, as they moved along that black, yielding corridor, she began to speak in slow, rounded tones:

*'For once I looked on worlds  
sublime,  
And knew pure Beauty, free from  
Time,  
Knew unchained Joy, untempered  
Hope;  
And coward, then, I fled!'*

Captain Bastable had been speaking the same words beneath his breath. 'Exactly!' he said, adding:

*'Detected now beneath the organ's  
note,  
The organ's groan, the bellows'  
whine;*

*And what the Sun made splendid,  
Bereft of Sun is merely fine!'*

Listening Jherek Carnelian felt a peculiar and unusual sensation. He had the impulse to separate them, to interrupt, to seize her and to carry her away from this handsome Victorian officer, this contemporary who knew so much better than did Jherek how to please her, to comfort her. He was baffled.

He heard Mrs Persson say: 'I do hope our arrangements suit you, Mr Carnelian. Is your mind more at ease?'

He spoke vaguely. 'No,' he said, 'it is not. I believe I must be "unhappy".'

7

*En Route for the End of Time*

'The capsule has no power of its own,' Una Persson explained. Morning light filtered through the opening in the wall above them as the four stood together in the Time Centre's compound and inspected the rectangular object, just large enough for two people and resembling, as Mrs Underwood had earlier remarked, nothing so much as a sedan chair. 'We shall control it from here. It is actually safer than any other kind of machine, for we can study the megaflow and avoid major ruptures. We shall keep you on course, never fear.'

'And be sure to remind Lord Jagged that we should be glad of his advice,' added Captain Bastable. He kissed Mrs Underwood's hand. 'It has been a very great pleasure, ma'am.' He saluted.

'It has been a pleasure for me to meet a gentleman,' she replied. 'I thank you, sir, for your kindness.'

'Time we were aboard, eh?' Jherek's joviality was of the false and insistent sort.

Una Persson seemed to be enjoying some private glee. She hugged one of Oswald Bastable's arms and whispered in his ear. He blushed.

Jherek climbed into his side of the box. 'If there's anything I can send you from the End of Time, let me know,' he called. 'We must try to keep in touch.'

'Indeed,' she said. 'In the circumstances, all we time travellers have is one another. Ask Jagged about the Guild.'

'I think Mr Carnelian has had his fill of adventuring through time, Mrs Persson.' Amelia Underwood was smiling and her attitude towards Jherek had something possessive about it, so that Jherek was bewildered even more.

'Sometimes, once we have embarked upon the exercise, we are not allowed to stop,' Una Persson said. 'I mention it, only. But I hope you are successful in settling, if that is what you wish. Some would have it that Time creates the human condition, you know—that, and nothing else.'

They had begun to shout, now that a loud thrumming filled the air.

'We had best stand clear,' said Captain Bastable. 'Occasionally there is a shock wave. The vacuum, you know.' He guided Mrs Persson towards the largest of the black huts. 'The capsule finds its own level. You have nothing to fear on that score. You won't be drowned, or burned, or compressed.'

Jherek watched them retreat. The thrumming grew louder and louder. His back pressed against Mrs Underwood's. He turned to ask her if she were comfortable, but before he could speak a stillness fell and there was complete silence. His head felt suddenly light. He looked to Mrs Persson and Captain Bastable for an answer, but they were gone and only a shadowy, flickering ghost of the black wall could be seen. Finally this, too, disappeared and foliage replaced it. Something huge and heavy and alive moved towards them, passed through them, it seemed, and was gone. Heat and cold became extreme, seemed one. Hundreds of colours came and went, but were pale, washed out, rainy. There was dampness in the air he breathed, little tremors of pain ran through him but were past almost before his brain could signal their presence. Booming, echoing sounds—slow sounds, deep and sluggish—blossomed in his ears. He swung up and down, he swung sideways, always as if the capsule were suspended from a wire, like a pendulum. He could feel her warm body pressed to his shoulders, but he could not hear her voice and he could not turn to see her, for every movement took infinity to consider and perform, and he appeared to weigh tons, though his mass spread through miles of space and years of time. The capsule tilted forward, but he did not fall from his seat; something pressed him in, securing him: grey waves washed him; red rays rolled from toe to head. The chair began to spin. He heard his own name, or something very like it, being called by a high, mocking voice. Words piped at him; all the words of his life.

## *All Travellers Returned: A Celebration*

He breathed in and it was as if Niagara engulfed him. He breathed out; Vesuvius gave voice.

Scales slipped by against his cheek and fur filled his nostrils and flesh throbbed close to his lips, and fine wings fluttered, great winds blew; he was drenched by a salty rain (he became the History of Man, he became a thousand warm-blooded beasts, he knew unbearable tranquility). He became pure pain and was the universe, the big, slow-dancing stars. His body began to sing.

In the distance:

*'My dear—my dear—my dearest dear...'*

His eyes had shut. He opened them.

*'My dear!'*

Was it Amelia?

But, no—he could move—he could turn and see that she was slumped forward, insensible. Still the pale colours swam. They cleared.

Green oak trees surrounded a grassy glade; cool sunlight touched the leaves.

He heard a sound. She had tumbled from the capsule and lay stretched, face forward, upon the ground. He climbed from his seat, his legs trembling, and went to her, even as the capsule made a wrenching noise and was gone.

*'Amelia!'* He touched soft hair, stroked the lovely neck, kissed the linen exposed by the torn velvet of her sleeve. *'Oh, Amelia!'*

Her voice was muffled. *'Even these circumstances, Mr Carnelian, do not entitle you to liberties. I am not unconscious.'* She moved her head so that her steady grey eyes could see him. *'Merely faint. Perhaps a trifle stunned. Where are we?'*

*'Almost certainly at the End of Time. These trees are of familiar workmanship. He helped her to her feet. 'I think it is where we originally came across the Lat. It would be logical to return me here, for Nurse's sanctuary is not far distant.' He had already recounted his adventures to her. 'The Lat space-ship is probably also nearby.'*

She became nervous. *'Should we not seek out your friends?'*

*'If they have returned. Remember, the last we saw of them was in London, 1896. They vanished—but did they return? Our destinations were the same. Almost certainly the Morpail Effect sent them home—but we know that Brannart's theories do not apply to all the phenomena associated with Time.'*

*'We'll not be served by further speculation,' she pointed out. 'You have your power rings still?'*

He was impressed by her sense. *'Of course!'* He stroked a ruby, turning three of the oaks in a larger version of the power boat of the Palaeozoic, but translucent, of jade. *'My ranch awaits us—rest or roister, as we will!'* He bowed low as,

with a set expression upon her beautiful features, she advanced towards the boat. He brought up the rear. *'You do not think the jewelled propeller vulgar?'* He was eager for her praise. *'It seemed a refinement.'*

*'It is lovely,'* said she, distantly. With considerable dignity, she entered the vessel. There were benches quilted with cloth-of-gold. She chose one near the centre of the craft. Joining her, he lounged in the prow. A wave of a hand and the boat began to rise. He laughed. He was his old self again. He was Jherek Carnelian, the son of a woman, the darling of his world, and his love was with him.

*'At last,'* he cried, *'our aggravations and adventures are concluded. The road has been a weary one, and long, yet at its end what shall we find but our own little cottage complete with cat and kettle, cream, crumpets, cranberries, kippers, cauliflower, crackers, custard, kedgeree for tea, sweet, my dear Amelia, sweet tranquility! Oh, you shall be happy. You shall!'*

Stiffly though she sat, she seemed more amused than insulted. She seemed pleased to recognise the landscapes streaming by below, and she did not chide him for his use of her Christian name, nor for his suggestions, which were, of course, improper.

*'I knew it!'* he sang. *'You have learned to love the End of Time.'*

*'It does have certain attractions,'* she admitted, *'after the Lower Devonian.'*



The jade air car reached the ranch and hovered. *'You see,'* said Jherek, *'it is almost exactly as you last saw it, before you were torn away from me and tumbled back through time. It retains all the features you proposed, familiar comforts of your own dear Dawn Age. You will be happy, Amelia. And anything else you wish, it shall be yours. Remember—my knowledge of your needs, your age, is much more sophisticated now. You will not find me the naif who courted you so long, it seems, ago!'*

*'It is the same,'* she said, and her voice was wistful, *'but we are not.'*

*'I am more mature,'* he agreed, *'a better mate.'*

*'Ah!'* She smiled.

He sensed ambiguity. *'You do not love another? Captain Bastable...'*

She became wicked. *'He is a gentleman of excellent manners. And his bearing—so soldierly...'* But her eyes laughed at her words. *'A match any mother would approve. Were I not already married, I should be the envy of Bromley—but I am married, of course, to Mr Underwood.'*

Jherek made the car spiral down towards the rose-gardens and the rockeries he had created for her, and he said with some nervousness: *'He said he would—what?—divest you!'*

*'Divorce. I should have to appear in court—millions of years from here. It seems—turning so that he should not see her face—that I shall never be free.'*

*'Free? Free? No woman was ever more free. Here is humanity triumphant—Nature conquered—all desires may be fulfilled—of enemies, none. You can live as you please. I shall serve you. Your whims shall be mine, dearest Amelia!'*

*'But my conscience,'* she said. *'Can I be free from that?'*

His face fell. *'Oh, yes, of course, your conscience. I was forgetting it.'* The car sank to the lawn. *'You did not leave it, then, behind? In Eden?'*

*'There? I had greater need of it, did I not?'*

*'I thought you suggested otherwise.'*

*'Then condemn me as fickle. All women are so.'*

*'You contradict yourself. but apparently without relish.'*

*'Ha!'* She was the first to leave the craft. *'You refuse to accuse me, Mr Carnelian? You will not play the game? The old game?'*

*'I did not know there was a game, Amelia. You are disturbed? The set of your shoulders reveals it. I am confused.'*

She rounded on him, but her face was



softening. Her eyes held disbelief, fast fading. 'You do not try me for my femininity? I am not accused of womanliness?'

'All this is meaningless.'

'Then perhaps there is a degree of freedom here, at the End of Time, mixed with all your cruelties.'

'Cruelties?'

'You keep slaves. Casually, you destroy anything which bores you. Have you no consideration for these time travellers you capture? Was I not captured so—and put in a menagerie? And Yusharisp-barbarities for me. Even in my age such barbarities are banished!'

He accepted her admonishment. He bowed his head. 'Then you must teach me what is best,' he said. 'Is this "morality"?' .

She was overwhelmed, suddenly, by the enormity of her responsibility. Was it Salvation she brought to Paradise, or was it merely Guilt? She hesitated. 'We shall discuss it, in the fullness of time,' she told him.

They set foot upon the crazy paving of the path, between low yew hedges. The ranch Gothic red-brick reproduction of her ideal Bromley villa—awaited them. A parrot and two perched on chimneys and gables; they seemed to flute a welcome.

'It is as you left it,' he said. He was proud. 'But, elsewhere, I have built for a "London" so that you shall not be homesick. It still pleases you, the ranch?'

'It is as I remember it.'

He understood that he read disappointment in her tone.

'You compare it now with the original, I suppose.'

'It has the essentials of the original.'

'But remains a "mere copy", eh? Show me...'

She had reached the porch, run a hand over the painted timber, fondled a still blooming rose (for none had faded since she had vanished), touched the flower to her nose. 'It has been so long,' she murmured. 'I needed familiarity then.'

'You do not need it now?'

'Ah, yes. I am human, I am a woman. But perhaps there are other things which come to mean more. I felt, in those days, that I was in hell tormented, mocked, abused—in the company of the mad. I had no perspective.'

He opened the door, with its stained-glass panels. Potted plants, pictures, carpets of Persian design, dark paint were revealed in the gloom of the entrance hall.

'If there are additions...,' he began.

'Additions!' She was half amused. She inspected the what-nots and the aspidistras with a disdainful eye. 'No more, I think.'

'Too cluttered now?' He closed the door and caused light to blossom.

'The house could be bigger. More windows, perhaps. More sun. More air.'

He smiled. 'I could remove the roof.'

'You could, indeed!' She sniffed. 'Yet it is not as musty as I supposed it would be. How long is it since you departed it?'

'That's difficult. We can only find out by conferring with our friends. They will know. My range of scents has much improved since I visited 1896. I agree that it was an area in which I was weak. But my palette is altogether enriched.'

'Oh, this will do, Mr Carmelian. For the present, at any rate.'

'You cannot voice your disquiet?'

She turned kind eyes on him. 'You possess a sensitivity often denied by your behaviour.'

'I love you,' he said simply. 'I live for you.'

She coloured. 'My rooms are as I left them? My wardrobe remains intact?'

'Everything is there.'

'Then I will rejoin you for lunch.' She began to mount the stairs.

'It will be ready for you,' he promised.

He went into the front parlour, staring around him at this Collins Avenue of the mind, peering through the windows at the gentle green hills, the mechanical cows and sheep with their mechanical cow-boys and shepherds, all perfectly reproduced to make her feel at home. He admitted to himself that her response had bewildered him. It was almost as if she had lost her taste for her own preferred environment. He sighed. It had seemed so much easier when her ideas were definite. Now that she herself found them difficult to define, he was at a loss.

Antimacassars, horsehair furniture, red-black-and-yellow carpets of geometrical pattern, framed photographs, thick-leaved plants, the harmonium with which she had eased her heart, all now (because she seemed to have disapproved) accused him as a brute who could never please any woman, let alone the finest woman who had ever breathed. Still in the stained rags of his 19th-century suit, he slumped into an armchair, head on hand, and considered the irony of his situation. Not long since, he had sat in this house with Mrs Underwood and made tentative suggestions for its improvement. She had forbidden any change. Then she had gone and all that he had left of her was the house itself. As a substitute, he had come to love it. Now it was she who suggested improvements (of almost exactly the kind he had proposed) and he felt a deep reluctance to alter a single potted palm, a solitary sideboard. Nostalgia for those times when he had courted her and she had tried to teach him the meaning of virtue, when they had sung hymns together in the evenings (it had been she, again, who had insisted upon a daily time scale similar to that which she had known in Bromley), filled him—and with nostalgia came trepidation that his hopes were

doomed. At every stage, when she had been close to declaring her love for him, to giving herself to him, she had been thwarted. It was almost as if Jagged watched them, deliberately manipulating every detail of their lives. Easier to think that, perhaps, than to accept an arbitrary universe.

He rose from the chair and, with an expression of defiance (she had always insisted that he follow her conventions), created a hole in the ceiling through which he might pass and enter his own room, a haven of glittering white, gold and silver. He restored the floor to completeness and his ruby ring cleansed his body of Palaeozoic grime, placed waiting robes of white spider-fur about him, brought ease to his mind as it dawned on him that his old powers (and therefore his old innocence) were restored to him. He stretched himself and laughed. There was certainly much to be said for being at the mercy of the primeval elements, to be swept along by circumstances one could not in any way control, but it was good to return, to feel one's identity expand again, unchecked. Creatively, he knew that he would be capable of the best entertainments he had yet given his world. He felt the need for company, for old friends to whom he could retail his adventures. Had his mother, the magnificent Iron Orchid, yet returned to the End of Time? Was the Duke of Queens as vulgar as ever, or had his experiences taught him taste? Therek became eager for news.

In undulating white, he left his room and began to cross the landing, crammed with nooks which in turn were crammed with little china figurines, china vases, china flowers, china animals, to the stairs. His emerald power ring brought him delicate scents, of Lower Devonian ferns, of 19th-century streets, of oceans and of meadows. His step grew lighter as he descended to the dining room. 'All things bright and beautiful,' he sang, 'all creatures great and small...'

A turn of his amber ring and an ethereal orchestra accompanied him. The amethyst and peacocks stepped behind him, his train in their prim beaks, their feathers at full flourish. He passed an embroidered motto—he still could not read it, but she had told him its sense (if sense it were!): 'What Mean These Stones?' he carolled. 'What Mean These—tra-la-la—Stones?'

His spider-fur robes began to brush ornaments from the shelves at the side of the stairs. With scarcely any feelings of guilt at all, he widened the steps a little, so that he could pass more freely.

The dining room, dark, with heavy curtains and brown, gloomy furniture, dampened his spirits for only a second. He knew what she had once demanded—



partially burned animal flesh, near-tasteless vegetables—and he ignored it. If she no longer dictated her pleasures, then he would offer his own again.

The table bloomed exotic. A reminder of their recent adventures—a spun-sugar water scorpion glittering as a centrepiece two translucent scarlet jellies, two feet high, in the image, to the life, of Inspector Springer. A couple of herds of animated marzipan cows and sheep (to satisfy her relish for fauna) grazing, in miniature, at the bases of the jellies. Everywhere: fronds of yellow, blue, pink, white, lilac and purple, of savoury, brittle pastry. Not a typical table, for Jherek usually chose for colour and preferred to limit himself to two, with one predominating perhaps not a tasteful table, even—but a jolly one that he hoped she would appreciate. Great green pools of gravy; golden mounds of mustards; brown, steaming custards, and pies in a dozen pastel shades; bowls of crystals—cocaine in the blue, heroin in the silver, sugar in the black—and tottering pyramids of porridge a dish for any mood, to satisfy every appetite. He stood back, grinning his pleasure. It was unplanned, it was crowded, but it had a certain zest, he felt, that she would appreciate.

He struck the nearby gong. Her feet were already upon the stairs.

She entered the room. 'Oh!'

'Lunch, my lovely Amelia. Lunch together, I fear, but all quite edible.'

She eyed the little marzipan ruminants.

He beamed. 'I knew you'd like those. And Inspector Springer? Does he not amuse you?'

Fingers flew to lips; a sound escaped her nostrils. The bosom rose and then was slow to fall; she was almost as red as the jelly.

'You are distressed?'

Eruption. She doubled, gasping.

'Fumes?' He stared wildly. 'Something poisonous?'

'Oh, ho, ho...' She straightened, hand at back of hip. 'Oh, ho, ho!'

He relaxed. 'You are amused.' He pulled back her chair, as she had trained him to do. She slumped down, still shaking, picking up a spoon. 'Oh, ho, ho...'

He joined in. 'Oh, ho, ho.'

It was thus, before they had put a morsel to their mouths, that the Iron Orchid found them. They saw her in the doorway, after some time. She was smiling. She was resplendent.

'Dear Jherek, wonder of my womb! Astonishing Amelia, ancestress without compare! Do you hide from us all? Or are you just returned? If so, you are the last. All travellers are back—even Mongrove, you know. He has returned from space—gloomier, if anything, than before. We speculated. We expected your return.

Jagged was here—he said that he sent you on, but that only the machine arrived, —bereft of passengers. Some would have it—Brannart Morphail in particular—that you were lost forever in some primitive age—destroyed. I disbelieved, naturally. There was talk, earlier, of an expedition, but nothing came of it. Today, at My Lady Charlottina's, there was a rumour of a fluctuation—a time machine had been sensed for a second or two on one of Brannart's instruments. I knew it must be you!'

She had chosen red for her chief colour. Her crimson eyes glittered with maternal joy at her son restored to her. Her scarlet hair curled itself here and there about her face, as if in ecstasy, and her poppy-coloured flesh seemed to vibrate with pleasure. As she moved, her perspek gown, almost the colour of clementines, creaked a little.

'You know there is to be a celebration?' she said. 'A party so that we may all hear Mongrove's news. He has consented to appear, to speak. And the Duke of Queens, Bishop Castle, My Lady Charlottina—we shall be there to give our tales. And now you and Mrs Underwood? Where have you been you rogues? Hiding here, or adventuring through History?'

Mrs Underwood began: 'We have had a tiring experience, Mrs Carnelian, and I think...'

'Tiring? Mrs What? Tiring? I'm not certain of the meaning. But Mrs Carnelian—that is excellent. I never thought—yes, excellent. I must tell the Duke of Queens. She cruised for the door. 'But I'll interrupt your meal no longer. The theme for the celebration is of course 1896—' a gesture to Mrs Underwood—'and I know you will both surpass yourselves! Farewell!'

Mrs Underwood implored him: 'We are not going?'

'We must!'

'It is expected?'

He knew secret glee in his own cunning. 'Oh, indeed it is,' he said.

'Then, of course, I shall go with you.'

He eyed her crisp cream dress, her pinned auburn hair. 'And the beauty of it is,' he said, 'that if you go as you are, the purity of your conception will outshine all others!'

She snapped a branch from a savoury frond.

## END OF PART ONE

*Apart from Alfred Austin's, all verses quoted in the text are the work of Ernest Wheldrake. The majority are from Posthumous Poems published in 1881 and never reprinted.*







